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Sawgrass and the broken heart: Stories

by

Brenna Dixon

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Major: Creative Writing & Environment

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Ames, Iowa

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The Weight of Birds

Passenger pigeons were thick in the sky the year my father went to war. This time they roosted, stayed, thicker than they'd ever been in our part of the woods. The first night the pigeons settled in around us, I asked Mama when Pop was coming back. She sighed, patted down her apron the way she did, and said, I don't know, Thomas, and added another stubby carrot to the pot. Go check for eggs.

We had a couple of nesting hens in a lean-to out back and I slid my hands beneath them, groping feathers, searching for eggs. There were none. I ran my fingers along the boards, following the grain to the spot where my father had carved his initials with a penknife. I was here once, the initials said. I built this.

Pop volunteered to fight. For the South, he told me. For the wages, he told Mama. We need the wages.

He left with the Alabama Volunteer Corps the next day, walked off with a man named Hutchins who was missing three fingers. I can use a saw, Pop said to us from the doorframe, his eyes steady like always. They're going to need saws.

He bent down and looked me in the eye. Squeezed my shoulder. Touched my face with calloused hands.

The pigeons came a month later.

The birds took to the southern long leaf pines around us that January and white-washed the roof inside of a week. Mama sent me up there to scrub it. I got on my hands and knees, the slat roof giving a little beneath my nine years' weight. I slopped water, working

the boards over with an old dandy brush I found in the pine needles before they were covered by inches of pigeon droppings. After a while, Mama came out hollering at me to get down and stop dripping water through the roof. I even tried to fix the gaps with castoffs from the woodpile, but Pop was the carpenter and the pieces wouldn't fit. Mama stripped me clean of my clothes in the yard and tossed buckets of barreled rainwater over me till the chalky white came off my skin. Naked, I felt all those thousands of bird eyes watching me.

On Sundays, an old slave woman came through the trees with a basket of clothes for Mama to mend. Mrs. Adkins sent her from the plantation up the road where I tended hogs. The slave woman's bony neck curled out from under a knot of thick graying hair. Gray like the pigeons. She handed over her load, quiet, and turned back the way she came. She walked slow. She hummed to the birds. Sometimes, from the trees, I'd hear her whisper freedom and sold-off family. Her weathered eyes always found me.

I saw her sometimes, at the Adkins' plantation, hanging laundry on the line. Sheets snapped white against her skin. When the fattest hog got out through broken fence slats in March and Mr. Adkins hit me, called me a waste, sent me after them, she was humming to clothespins. The hogs were quick despite their weight. I wished for wings, for speed, for hollow bones instead of feet, for my father's bravery. One hog bowled me over. The other drew blood. I snapped a cedar switch and turned on them, drove them back. The fence was patched and the house-girl, Tessa, stood near it. She held a water bucket in one dark hand.

Old Hannah said to bring you water, she said.

I took the ladle and drank.

You fix the fence? I asked.

Nuh uh. No, sir, she said. Hannah done that.

In April Old Hannah didn't come around. The pigeons lifted from the trees and sped north. I watched them from Mr. Adkins' hog shed, watched the hogs ignore them, Mr. Adkins ignore them, everyone ignore them except the slaves and me. The day-long stretch of them led me home to empty trees.

Three envelopes were delivered to us three months apart, each containing six dollars and a letter Mama never let me see. We never got another letter after I turned ten and the pigeons migrated back. I'd lie awake at night listening to her humming hymns, wishing I could see the stars through the slivers in our roof, wondering where Pop was and what he was doing. Sometimes I worried about him and dreamt of the pigeons' scarlet eyes, the way the round black pupils stared.

Some nights I'd wake up to branches cracking under the weight of the birds. It sounded like the rifle shots we began to hear when the war started. We could never be sure which it was. Mama would hurry off her straw tick and sit next to me all huddled in my pile of discarded blankets and clothes people never picked up. She'd sit rigid as a chair leg till we heard the rustle of wings and the creak of bird-weight settling a little bit farther off or a little bit closer. In the morning we'd find dozens of dead pigeons lying broken on the dung-blanching ground where a pine bough had dragged them down and down. Mama watched me close those years. I think she was afraid I'd go off and join the war, and sometimes I thought about it. Thought maybe if I went, I could find Pop and bring him back. But then I'd see

Mama's face, drawn and worried while she prayed, thinking I was still asleep. Hail Mary, she'd say. Hail Mary. And the pigeons were still.

When I was eleven a man in a grey uniform showed up at our door. I hid behind the woodpile and watched dark circles spread beneath his armpits. He kept looking at the pigeons, thousands of them perched in the trees, huddled things all blue and grey. He shifted his weight from one boot to the other and gripped his hat tight until Mama came to the door. Her face grew white at the sight of him. I heard her ask him if he'd met a man named John Mason and he shook his head, No Ma'am.

They needed a drummer, the soldier said, and allowed that it was Mr. Adkins who'd directed him to us. To me. Mama smoothed her apron. It was the slight downturn at the corners of her mouth that gave her away as a mother safeguarding a son. The soldier spoke low just then and Mama stiffened at the touch of his fingers to her cheek. He bent to her ear again. She glanced once at the pigeons and turned inside. The soldier followed. I couldn't move.

Later I found a round gold button on the floor. It felt cold and heavy in my hand. I slipped it in my pocket and thought to bury it but couldn't.

Pop kept buckshot in his pocket. The lead was smooth and faintly red. He didn't believe in waste.

Get your animal then get your shot back, he told me.

Pop placed the duck on the cutting board.

He drew his knife from breastbone to sternum to stomach and worked away the flesh, exposing the purple-pink innards. He found two bits of buckshot in the stomach and chest. Removed them. Placed them in a tin cup of water. They were lost in clouds of pink.

Mornings, we'd be up at dawn. Mama boiled grits and steeped coffee. We could feel the passenger pigeons wake before we saw them do it. A tension built out of the quiet, a shifting of innumerable feet from one to the other, a rustling of wings from trees hung heavy with feathers. A soft moaning, the earth itself rousing from sleep. Then they'd be up in a flurry of wings to scour the surrounding area for food enough to sustain them all. By eleven the last bird would be out of sight and the woods left strangely quiet. Daylight would appear suddenly, as if the pigeons carried darkness away with them.

Emerging from the woods meant wearing a hat and wishing for rain to clear away the heat for a time. Walking the long dirt road that led to Mr. Adkins' place left my ankles caked with dust. I'd palm the Confederate button and pull it out of my pocket, tracing the *AVC* over and over again, scraping my thumbnail across the embossed eagle. I held the button until it was warm and heavy with sun, then put it back. Mostly I thought about the pigeons. They were fast birds, bodies shaped to part air, and sometimes I'd see them off in the distance, a hovering splotch in the sky. I caught one once and tied a note to its leg and sent it to my father. I never saw it again. But in all those millions how could I expect to?

If the hogs were taken care of and he was short-handed, Mr. Adkins would put me up on the barn roof knocking two heavy sticks together to scare the pigeons off the peanuts.

A man has to learn to be alone, he'd say.

When the sticks weren't loud enough, I'd bang them on the tin roof and the rolling, hollow noise would shake its way up my legs and into the sky.

Tessa brought me water twice a day the days I spent up there. The roof was too hot for sleeves and I grew steadily red as the sun ticked off the hours. Pink in the morning, fevered red an hour after noon. She met me halfway up the ladder and liked to poke at my skin, to watch her white fingerprints fade. It hurt but I didn't say a word, just bit my lip. She rarely spoke, rarely looked away from my skin and the rungs of the ladder. I'd drag myself back up to the roof and watch her form, small with distance, disappear into the house. Dripped water hissed to steam on the roof and I wished for the pigeons to cover the sun. Let them burn instead.

I'd taken to collecting pigeon feathers for their size and their color. When the woods were empty, they helped me remember fullness. I kept them in Pop's old wooden cigarette box so each feather smelled faintly of his tobacco. The feathers were soft beneath my nose, between my fingers. Light in my hands. An iridescent purple-blue.

The next time I was at the plantation I tended hogs, shuffling slop, a slim feather tucked in my pocket, light against the button's weight. A pile of dead pigeons sat in the corner, plucked. Their red eyes like blood clots on naked bodies.

Needed the feathers, Mr. Adkins had said. Hogs'll eat the rest.

Tessa came out with a pail of water at lunchtime and she dipped me a ladle. She watched beaks and wings disappear down throats, listened to the crunch of bone, eyed the rest of the pigeons in the corner, said nothing but looked down. Hogs squealed behind us. Two gripped one end each of a pigeon. I took two more pigeons from the pile, their skin

stubbled from plucked feathers. My knife hesitated, then cut limb from limb before placing them in the trough. I wiped my hands on a piece of cloth, trying to ignore the way they stained the fabric red. Tessa turned to leave and I touched her shoulder, held out the feather to her because she was the only one who saw the pigeons, too. The next time I was on the roof, she climbed halfway up the ladder with my feather in her hair.

Mr. Adkins fed his hogs a portion of grain everyday, and that year the fields he bought from were picked clean by pigeons. He sent me up to the roof more often, so I saw more sun than hogs, and one day after the feather I asked Tessa to come all the way up to the top with the water. She did.

Look there, I said and pointed to a dark stripe moving across our field of vision.

Pigeons.

She touched the feather in her hair then slipped away, down the ladder, back to the house where Mr. Adkins sold her across the state. I hated him then. The pigeons twisted their shape to fit the sky.

The war came closer and the Adkins' plantation became a place for wounded men to die. I scrubbed blood from basins most days and it left my hands a stained shade of pink. The metallic click of lead bullets hitting trays was sometimes deadened by red. Groans echoed in my ears and every face was my father's, every gray coat was the man that came to our door and left behind a button. Mama fixed linens and was mother to dying sons, and in these moments her eyes went flat. I thought of Tessa and my stomach hurt. I thought of my

father and his saw, and my stomach hurt. I thought of my mother's eyes and the grey man's hands, thought of the pigeons that carried letters only to the sky, and my stomach hurt.

We stayed nights at the plantation sometimes because someone had to be there to listen to diseased men breathe. I'd lie on empty sacking in a corner and listen to Mama's quiet prayers, quieting words for dying men, and watch her smooth their faces the best she could. The shuffling of turning men was not the same as that of the pigeons. Every movement was a mark of pain, another life-soaked strip of cloth to clean, another basin to empty.

The pigeons left early that year. By mid-March they were gone and the war moved with them: a new plantation in a new town to house fresh bullet wounds, and a new stretch of forest in a northern state to shape pigeons from shell. I went home at night to empty woods. Mama pulled at the edges of her skirt and I knew the grey man had been there. The button sat heavy in my pocket, burned against my skin.

There's cornbread on the oven, Mama said. Eat.

She held my eyes. Her face said, You'll never find him, and, I can't lose you, too.

Her voice said, Eat.

We got hungry sometimes but Mama wouldn't let us eat the pigeons even though most people did. Slave food, she called it. Hog food. She had her pride. I snuck out at night once. The ground glowed with a slick new layer of white. The birds didn't even startle when I walked up close and knocked one of them out of the tree with a rock. They shifted uneasily for a moment then puffed back up to sleep. I was hungry and thought to build a small fire and roast the pigeon, but when I found it lying prostrate on the ground its breast still moved with breath. I crouched there in the dark and watched the bird's eye watching me. Watched

the red eye empty. The pigeon was light in my hands and smooth. Feathers fell from its body. I gathered them and laid the bird at the foot of a tree, offering it back to its own. Innumerable dark shapes sat above me in the branches of the white-streaked pine.

The hogs gave birth in July and I waited to turn thirteen. When I found the corn snake dead in the hog shed grain bin, I stretched it out on the floor, crouched over the body, touched it.

The door opened, shut. Mr. Adkins' shadow stretched grey across my shoulders.

You ever seen a corn snake so big? he asked.

No, sir.

I re-settled my hat. He crouched down beside me and folded his hands together, resting his chin on his fingertips.

Look.

He held the snake with his eyes. Great red patches covered its grey. A large bulge stretched the scales around its throat.

Must've choked to death, sir, I said.

Looks like it, he agreed. Ugliest damn thing I've seen in awhile.

He was quiet for a moment.

Reach on in there and pull it out, he said.

I quick looked at him. Sir? I asked.

Go on, he said. It's dead anyway. See what's in there.

I stared.

You deaf, son? he asked. Pull it out. It better not be a piglet.

I slid my hands beneath the snake, felt its cold weight against my palms.

Squeeze the lump up, Mr. Adkins said. He wiped at his face with a handkerchief.

Piglets squealed for milk behind us. Three less of them than yesterday, the sow a little fatter.

I gripped the body behind the lump and slid it through my hands, slowly forcing regurgitation.

A pink tail poked out of the mouth.

There, now pull, said Mr. Adkins.

The tail was warm between my fingers and I imagined the corn snake, relieved of its meal, would breathe again and bite. I pulled. The mouse slid out, detaching the snake's jaw, stretching the skin. It dropped to the floor, wet. A pink foot twitched.

Mr. Adkins stood. Get rid of it, he said.

The door shut behind him.

Mama and I heard the passenger pigeons coming south to us hours before they arrived. It was the drum-noise their wings made that marked their coming. We waited. Watched them spill down through the treetops, dodge trunks and branches quick as bullets. Saw the few that missed drop to the earth.

We found the pigeon dead behind the dresser, wings splayed, body bent, no idea how it got there. It was the smell that led us to it, like spoiled meat. Mama went white when I pulled the dresser back.

Put it outside, she said. Bury it.

I picked the bird up by the feet and hoped it wasn't true that birds inside brought bad luck.

Outside, the trees were empty. The birds were gone for the day. I scraped away a layer of white and dug a hole where our garden had been. The pigeon looked wrong in the dark, surrounded by earth. Its feathers seemed duller. Its neck curved all wrong. Dirt speckled its breast then covered it, and I patted the earth flat with my hands.

It was on the way home from tending hogs when I was thirteen that the gray man found me. His coat was muddied and he wore a rifle across his back. He held his head tilted to the side just slightly, listening to distant gunfire pop. I shivered in the late-day light.

The man looked at me. I couldn't help but stare back at the hollow above his right eye.

Where you headed? he asked.

I fumbled with the button in my pocket, rolling it between my fingers, searching his coat for an empty eyehole. He came closer and the notch above his eye seemed larger in the growing dark.

Well, he said. I'm thinking you're headed home. How about I come along, get some water before I carry on?

I felt my skin crawl. He smelled sour and old. I ran. In darkness, I found myself beneath the pigeons, my feet slick with dung and dust. Went inside and shut the door. Mama started at my appearance. A knock on the door.

Don't answer it, I said.

She moved toward the door and peeked through a crack between boards. Her face blanched.

Let me in and I'll leave the boy, the gray man said.

Outside, pigeon calls creaked like trees.

That night Mama and I watched the gray man eat, watched the way his fingers gripped the crude spoon, the way they dipped cornbread into meager stew and brought the mixture to a bearded mouth surrounded by fine lines. No one had spoken since Mama fixed his supper, dropping the cornbread twice, dusting it off, apologizing. And no one spoke now. Mama's shoulders fell into place a little with the settling of the pigeons outside.

The war is ending, he said.

Mama stared at him, her mouth drawn tight. She gripped my hand beneath the table.

He set his spoon down then spoke.

We're going to lose.

The gray man wouldn't leave, threatened to take me with him if Mama tried to force him out. I thumbed the button, watched Mama stare harder at her sewing when his footsteps paused behind her. The pigeons ran sharp beaks over feathers. Pop wasn't there. So I stole. Bit by bit. I hid pocketfuls of grain from the hog shed bin in a sack buried behind the woodpile.

The gray man shaved, revealed pitted scars sprayed across pale skin. He stepped outside each morning to check for pigeons and only went for wood if they were gone. I waited until I had enough, then dug up the sack and climbed to the roof. One by one in the early grey light, the birds lifted their heads, stretched their wings. I pulled the sack closer to the edge. Waited.

It happened quickly. The gray man stepped out, I poured, the pigeons dove. I waited on the roof, arms over my head, peering at the mass of grey-blue and beaks from between elbows. If he yelled, I couldn't hear it above the sound of wings. When the pigeons lifted I found him dazed and bloodied. The bottom half of the door was scratched raw. Mama, I learned, had closed it so the birds couldn't fly in. I dropped the button in the gray man's lap and went inside.

When I went back out he was gone and the pigeons were not.

It was the day the passenger pigeons shot up and headed north to nest that Mr. Adkins handed me a stick and told me to come. It would be dark for days before they cleared the area. Mr. Adkins walked for a while, all the time beneath a moving sky. His shotgun swung darkly from one lean hand. We reached a clearing, a stretch of land where the pigeons twisted together forming one shape and then another.

Here, he said. We stop here.

The birds flew low enough that I could reach up my hands and feel them graze my fingertips. Soft. Rushed. I closed my eyes to their rustle.

A shot that left my ears ringing. The soft sound of fluttering in the dirt.

I stared at the bird at my feet, its wings bent funny, a deep red all wrong on its feathers.

Well? Mr. Adkins said. Don't make me waste bullets, boy.

The stick felt heavy in my hands.

Another shot and several pigeons fell, still, to the ground. Crops burst open upon impact, expelling fistfuls of beechnuts. The bird at my feet moved less.

Start swinging, he said.

Another shot.

Adkins squinted down the barrel of the gun, his right eye wide, his left eye scrunched up tight.

I thought of the pigs up at the plantation and the way they rolled in mud and straw. The way they ate the birds Mr. Adkins shot for feathers.

Thomas. Mr. Adkins lowered his gun and leveled his eyes at me in the pigeon-dark. If you see one moving, kill it.

The pile of pigeons, half-alive, grew around him.

Mr. Adkins bent to reload.

I know you did it, he said.

Skyward wings muffled sound. My hands dampened the bark of the stick.

Did what, sir? I asked.

Boy, don't act like I'm stupid, he said. You stole my grain, my property.

A spray of pigeon shot brought more birds flailing to the ground.

I didn't bother with excuses. This, my father had told me, was what being a man meant.

That bunch of grain you took? How much do you figure you had? Mr. Adkins asked.

He clicked the butt to the barrel and cocked the rifle.

A sack-full, sir, I said.

Well all right then, he said. I figure that's about two months you and your mama work for no wages to make it up. Sound good?

He followed the pigeons with his rifle.

Yes, sir, I said, and two things came to mind: Mama's face and Pop's buckshot.

Good, he said and looked me in the eye. Don't you steal from me again or I'll feed your fingers to the hogs so you can't even lift the lid off that grain bucket. Understand?

Yes, sir, I said.

I swung the stick down at the pigeon-strewn ground and felt the fragile crack of bone. Blood mixed with earth.

Again and again.

And in the end we had more pigeons than we could carry back.

And in the end the pigeons were gone.

Deep Sea Fishing

The oil would hit the Atlantic shore in two days, grey-black tar balls like obese tadpoles. That's what the news said, and it killed me, filled me with a dead sound because once that happened that was it, no one would want to be out there and I'd be homeless just like the scuba diver.

He puddled on my doormat in cracked yellow fins, a thinning surfer's mane drooping in his eyes and a paunchy beer gut pressing at his wetsuit. The guy's side was ragged against the backdrop of the Atlantic. I half-closed the door because crazies are a dime a dozen in South Florida.

"How'd you get here like that?" I asked.

He straightened all tall (which caused his wound to spurt a little blood) and said, "I'm freaking Poseidon and I'm outrunning the ocean." Dark blood welled through the fingers below his rib cage. His eyes narrowed. "I've been all up and down this damn building and you're the only one who opened the door."

My bad luck I guess.

It should be noted here that I'm on the 10th floor of a high-rise on Pompano Beach. The pink-orange one that looks like a dirty sunset. From my balcony I could see my fishing boats—Old Wilhelmina floating among the docks, The Good Lucille hunkered down on her trailer, shore-bound. Athena's weathered apartment building was several blocks west of my line of vision, but I still checked for it every day, just as I checked the waterline for the approaching oil spill.

When I didn't acknowledge that Poseidon had spoken, just stared at the bite beneath his ribs trying to figure out by radius which kind of shark got him, he snapped his fingers.

"You got any beer, man? I could really use a beer."

So I lit a smoke and invited him in for a Bud and some bandages. I figured it'd be bad karma to let some crazy dude with a god complex wander around the building until he passed out from blood loss.

Poseidon flipper-printed all down my carpet and onto the kitchen linoleum where he stood in front of the fridge playing with the hole in his side, fingers darting in and coming away bloody, then going back in to feel around some more. He rolled shredded bits of skin, or maybe wetsuit, between his fingertips. When he poked each piece back into his body, that was when my cigarette started tasting like dead fish. I stubbed it out in the sink, then brought in the gauze and ace bandage.

Poseidon popped the top on a can and sat at my kitchen table.

"Here," I said. I bent to wrap the gash and he snatched the materials away from me.

"I can do it myself," he said. He wound the bandages around and around his middle until the blood disappeared, never wincing.

"You can't stay long," I said. "I'm late for work. And why are you wearing a wetsuit?"

I threw a couple of dish towels over the pink water beneath him, and when he went to scratch, a piece of intestine or something fell out, rippling the puddle. I think he did it on purpose.

"You don't believe I'm me," he said.

"Poseidon?" I asked. "Not so much."

He stared hard in the direction of the sink, his skin concentrated in tight ripples between his eyebrows. I couldn't tell if he was sweating or if he was still wet from the ocean.

His face grew redder, then finally slid back through shades of pink until he slumped down in his chair.

"Look in the sink, jerkwad," he said.

So I did.

My cigarette was gone. In its place: a sardine smushed face-first into the basin, its tail twitching in the air. I picked it up. Pressed its fleshy weight between my fingers. Its cool silvered skin. The lateral line horizontally spanning its body.

The 8 a.m. beer had nothing to do with it. The fish was legit.

I stared at Poseidon, thinking how much easier it would be to keep a fishing business afloat during an oil spill if I could just screw up my eyes and will the fish into existence.

"Give it here," he said, and beckoned with his fingers. I tossed the sardine over. He popped it in his mouth and swallowed. "Gotta refill the reserves."

I nodded. "Sure. Now tell me how you did that."

He took a swig of Bud.

"This is shitty beer," he said, squinting one blue eye at the can.

"Then have water," I said, sipping at my own.

Poseidon shuddered. He set his can down. "What's your name anyway?"

Nice of him to ask, right? Him coming into my house and getting blood on my floor and letting my beer dribble down his double chin?

"Donovan," I said. The name made me feel forty at ten years old and it still made me feel forty at thirty.

Poseidon crossed his legs and jiggled a flipper, flinging water around the kitchen.

"Were you the kid who used to pop jellyfish and fill them with sand?" he asked.

I was. Their translucent skins stretched tight like sandwich bags, bulging with sea grit. Top-heavy. Thin, useless tentacles. I'd take them to the end of the pier and toss them, one by one, into the salty green water. Watching them sink was my favorite part. They disappeared in their hovering way.

"They were dead already," I said.

"Right, right," said Poseidon, running a hand through his hair, leaving behind red streaks. "Just making sure I have the right Donovan."

I didn't appreciate the way he said my name.

"You have to go," I said. "I have work." The tourists would be waiting, wanting to land the 400-pound marlin they'd heard about from a friend of a friend who'd once hooked one before it got away. No one hooked marlin anymore, but they didn't need to know that.

Poseidon stared at me, the creases in his tan face deepening. He looked old.

"Don't hang me out to dry, man," he said. "I can't go back in the water. Look. Let me level with you."

"You can level with me while we walk," I said. I checked my pockets for keys and headed out the door. Poseidon followed me into the elevator. The doors shut and for a good few seconds we stood there in complete silence, me watching him toy with the bandage plastered over his wound, him staring pointedly at the ceiling. The speakers in the elevator had broken months ago. No more muzak.

When the buzzer chimed for the eighth floor, Poseidon spoke.

"Leaving the water was a mistake, okay? You've made mistakes, too," he said.

"What do you mean I've made mistakes?" I asked. "You don't even know me."

I checked my watch. Athena got pissed when I was ten minutes late, let alone thirty.

Poseidon waved a hand. "You know. The whole oil rig thing. Before you went to college. When you were a roughneck."

I stopped. "How do you know about that?"

"Can we focus please? In case you haven't noticed, a shark attacked me."

He pointed to his side. The bleeding had slowed.

"So," I said. "People get attacked all the time. Only they don't usually survive."

"Sharks don't attack me."

"Why this one then?" I asked.

Poseidon glared at me. "Probably pissed about the oil spill same as everyone else."

"You can't fix it?" I asked.

"If I could, do you think I'd be dealing with this?" He pointed again to the bite in his side.

Despite losing what must have been gallons of blood, Poseidon hadn't gone into shock or died. Between that and the fish in my sink I figured there was at least some legitimacy to his god claim, which led me to a thought: seaweed dripping from his arms, an old bed sheet, a little plastic gold. The locals might not buy into it, but the Canadians—all those Ontario plates crowding the lots—they'd eat it up. And he could bring the fish. If he couldn't get rid of the oil, he could at least make it so no one walked away empty-handed. The spill would be here day after tomorrow. I needed as many fish as I could get.

We hit the first floor and stepped out of the elevator.

"I tell you what," I said. "You come work for me and you can stay in my spare room." I'd have to clear out the broken rods and old tackle boxes, but I'd been meaning to do that anyway.

For a minute I thought Poseidon was choking. His eyes even bugged out. I was a half-second from Heimliching him. Then he smiled a glinty sort of smile.

"I don't work for anyone," he said.

I smiled back. Entitlement. Everyone has a sense of entitlement these days, am I right? Every person on the boat deserves to catch a fish.

I swept an arm at the ocean. "Then go play king somewhere else."

He paled and I knew I had him. My meal ticket. My money man.

Poseidon bled slowly through the gauze and ace bandage wrapped around his side. He pulled at it while we walked down the sidewalk, a low stone wall between us and the sand, the sand between us and the ocean.

"Still looks pretty bad," I said.

"It'll heal over soon," said Poseidon. There was little conviction in his voice.

"Keep it covered or you'll freak out the customers," I told him.

Pavement heat seeped through the soles of my boat shoes. Poseidon thwacked along in his flippers, *slap slap slap*. Salt breeze rustled through palm fronds and sea grape leaves. Despite it all, despite my failing business—failing because during a recession no one has time for luxury, failing because nine times out of ten no one caught fish, failing because I couldn't afford to fix the outboard on The Good Lucille—I longed for open ocean. I longed for things to feel smaller.

Base camp for Don's Deep Sea Fishing was an old hot dog stand abandoned in a parking lot a few yards from the beach. Athena, my single employee and the woman I wanted more than anything, hated the salt-rusted tin roof. She said it made her edgy. I met Athena at Briny's Irish Pub when I first moved to Pompano eight years ago. She was the one behind the bar, hands full of glass and Guinness. When she laughed at my name and I asked hers, she shut right up. Then we both made our excuses—my parents walked down the aisle to "Mellow Yellow"; her parents felt her kick for the first time in Athens. When I needed a first mate, she was the only person to say yes to the job.

The day Poseidon entered the picture, Athena and I had two old women from Boca Raton signed up to catch dolphin. The fish, not the mammal. Only twelve customers in the past year had successfully landed dolphin.

The fishing shack's open rollaway hurricane shutters exposed Athena inside. She peered out of the darkness and fanned herself with a Mickey's Shrimp and Dogs take-out menu.

"A/C's broke," she said.

Fish-stink hung on the breeze.

"Blue-Hairs here yet?" I asked.

Athena paused, black curls sticking to her neck and chest, and glanced at Poseidon. Her tank top revealed the kelp tattooed up the inside of her left arm.

"Who's that?"

"Poseidon, Athena," I said. "Athena, Poseidon."

Poseidon's face went slack for a moment then rearranged itself into a smile.

I scratched my beard and peered out at the parking lot. The old purple beater we used to shuttle customers to the dock needed gas. Two or three fat, curly lizards sunned themselves on the electrical box that kept us in dim lights and, until then, air conditioning. Past that: People bunched along the pier railing. An old man in a Speedo exited the bathroom hut, rolls and rolls of stomach spilling over his tight, black suit.

No old ladies from Boca Raton.

"You know you just get hotter when you do that," I said, pointing to Athena's menu-fan.

"Do I?" She paused, eyes sleepy as if underwater, before turning to Poseidon. "What do you think?"

Then it happened. He turned on the god-charm. He squeezed his girth further into the stand, shoving me gut-first into the folding table, and took the fingers of the most beautiful woman on this shit strip of sand. He smelled her nail beds. Who does that? Who smells a person's nail beds? But Athena loved it, loved the way he compared her to tropical waters and living coral. I know this because her eyes narrowed and she smiled the kind of smile I'd only ever hoped she'd smile at me.

My face felt itchy with sweat and heat. I needed to shave.

"You exert more energy trying to keep yourself cool. You heat yourself up so the cooling effect cancels out," I said.

She didn't hear me. I could see her working to figure Poseidon out the way she figured out all of our clients. That's why she was so invaluable—she knew how to hook them in.

I shuffled through our dog-eared date book, looking for the Boca Blue-Hairs' appointment time.

"They say you beat heat with heat." I tossed her a warm water from under the desk. It knocked her in the chest, which I didn't mean for it to do, and she chucked it back at me.

"Jackass," she said.

I ducked and the bottle flew out onto the pavement, rolling till it hit sand. Maybe if I'd set up shop at the docks like all the other fishing outfits I wouldn't have been scrambling for loan payments. Except you had to have money to begin with to get a spot at the docks. Most of my roughnecking money had gone into my half-finished geography degree. The rest of it went into the boats. Athena resumed fanning herself and I motioned Poseidon outside where the air was cooler.

"Time to get dressed," I said.

Poseidon took the sheet and gaudy gold crown and raised an eyebrow. Blood trickled down his side.

"We'll grab some seaweed in a minute," I said. "Here." I shoved a broken spear gun at him. "Your trident."

"Nope," he said, and dropped it all right there in the parking lot. "No self-respecting son of Cronus would wear this shit."

I wanted a cigarette badly. I even went so far as to dig one out of my pocket and stick it between my lips before it turned into a sardine. After I spit it out, it lay there smoking on the pavement. We watched it, Poseidon and I, as it shriveled to an empty skin.

"Don't cross me," Poseidon said.

I pointed to the remnants of fish. "Do that out on the water, only bigger."

"You never said anything about going out there," he said.

"So don't go," I said. "I have work to do." I turned back toward the fishing shack, back toward Athena.

It wasn't fair the way Athena looked at Poseidon like he could do no wrong. I'd been working with her for two years and we'd only made out once, after christening The Good Lucille with a bottle of wine. Now it was all casual hip-bumps and her hand on my upper back as she slid past me in the small space we shared.

But despite all that, I needed Poseidon, needed him to bring the fish, so I walked slowly, hoping he wouldn't seriously leave.

Poseidon caught up to me. "Fine," he said, glancing at Athena. "But I'm staying in the wheelhouse."

She waved in our direction and we both waved back.

"No wheelhouse on my boat," I said.

A storm front hung dark and thick behind the lighthouse several miles down the coast. As the afternoon progressed the clouds crept steadily closer. Athena left every couple of hours and came back with Slurpees and Cokes from the 7-11 to keep us cool. Poseidon held each soda can with his fingertips.

"You're supposed to be outside getting customers," I said.

"Seriously, Don?" asked Athena. "It's about to pour."

Poseidon held out a hand.

"What?" I asked.

"Can I bum a cigarette?"

I stared at his cracked, green fingernails.

"Me too, while you're at it," said Athena.

"You don't smoke," I said. "You complain when I smoke."

She shrugged. "I'm trying new things."

Poseidon smiled a little and waggled his fingers. I dug two cigarettes out of my pocket and slapped them in his hand. He lit his, touched the burning end to the other, and handed it to Athena. She balanced the cigarette between her lips just as Poseidon had, her lips where his had been a second earlier. It was practically a kiss. The small space filled with smoke.

"I'm going to put gas in the van," I said.

"Wait. Don," said Athena. She coughed out a chestful of smoke and laughter. "Grab my gum out of the glove compartment?"

"Don't inhale so much," said Poseidon. He grinned. I stood and squeezed past him, making sure to bump his shark bite with my elbow.

"Not cool, man. Not cool," he said.

The air outside was thick with humidity, heavy with the oncoming storm, but it was fresh and god-free. I kicked at parking lot gravel and made my way to the old Windstar. Big, purple storm clouds hung over the far end of the pier. I sent up a quick prayer to whatever god ruled the sky. Please don't let it rain. Please don't let the oil roll in early. I scanned the water (nothing), then climbed in the driver's side and stuck my key in the ignition. Athena's loud, brash laughter echoed across the parking lot. I flipped off my own shop. Then I gave the ocean the bird, too.

I leaned out the window. "Take your sorry-ass god back," I shouted.

I turned the key. The engine sputtered and fell silent. A few fat, warm drops hissed on the pavement and smacked the windshield. No others followed. I slammed my palms against the steering wheel and the horn blared. I crossed the parking lot for the gas can only to find the shop window rolled down and locked.

A note taped to the door said: **DON. Biddies called. 8am tomorrow.**

Poseidon and Athena were gone.

At 5:00 P.M. my living room T.V. lit up with red and orange storm fronts and yellow ocean currents. Channel 6 said the tropical storm would hit full force by morning, bringing in the Gulf oil the morning after that. Nancy Nunez's toothy smile filled my screen.

"Watch your windows," she said. "Fill your bathtubs with water."

I dug my hurricane box out of the spare bedroom and dragged it into the living room. Candles, flashlights, canned food. I drank beer on my living room floor and balanced the business's books while I waited for Poseidon. Ten floors down, palm trees bent in the wind.

At 3 a.m. I woke up face-first in my budget book. The lights flickered, but stayed on. I peeled my cheek from the pages. Drool smeared the numbers of my **YOU'RE DOOMED** column into a bright red streak. Now I understood why Athena kept insisting I switch to a computer. A hard wind rattled my sliding glass door.

I dragged my feet over to the spare bedroom and stared at the empty futon in the far corner. I imagined Poseidon's hands on Athena's bare hips, Athena's chest against his chest. I forced myself to stop staring at the bed. Instead, I focused on the room. Broken poles leaned against the far wall. Four cracked buoys lay on the sagging futon. Boxes of who-

knows-what—books maybe? old dishes?—spilled from the closet into the middle of the room.

I closed the door.

In my own bedroom, I counted Mississippi's until I fell asleep.

My watch alarm went off at 7:15. I stumbled into the kitchen for a cup of coffee only to find Poseidon asleep on my couch, the ace bandage loose enough to show red flesh beneath. One arm dangled near the floor. I started a pot brewing then opened the blinds. A dark sky and heavy winds, but still no rain.

Poseidon groaned from the couch.

"That room's a shithole." He flung an arm in the direction of the spare room.

"How'd you get in?" I asked. I'd locked the door before going to bed.

"I'm a god, dumbass. I don't need a key." He smushed his face into the back of my couch. "Hey, thanks for locking me out by the way."

I poured myself a cup of coffee and hoped the throbbing between my eyes would go away. "Where's Athena?" I asked.

"How should I know? Is there coffee? I need coffee."

"You were with her, right? You guys left the shop together?" My stomach clenched.

"I don't know, man. Yeah, I was with her, but I guess she's at home, okay?"

Poseidon sat up. "What time is it?"

"Just after 7," I said. "What'd you guys do last night anyway?"

Poseidon grinned. "What do you think?" He stood and stretched, wincing at the tightness of his scabbing shark bite.

Bile rose in my throat. "Be ready to go in ten."

"Have you looked outside?"

"Yeah. Not much time to catch fish before the oil hits, right?"

I closed my bedroom door and called Athena. She didn't pick up.

Poseidon groaned about his head the whole walk to work.

"Shut up," I said. "It's like you've never had a hangover before."

"Gods are immune," he said.

"Obviously not."

We found Athena slumped in front of the shop, head resting on her knees. She looked up at us, bleary-eyed, as we approached.

"Took you guys long enough," she said.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

She tied her hair up in a messy bun and stood. "I'm fine. You, on the other hand," she pointed to Poseidon, "are a grade-A asshole and I hope you die."

I grinned and opened the door.

"What happened to your key?" I asked.

Athena rolled up the hurricane shutter.

"Ask him," she said, jabbing a finger in Poseidon's direction.

Poseidon put an arm around Athena's middle. "Come on," he said. "We had fun, right?"

Athena backhanded him in the side, right in the shark bite. Poseidon turned a pale shade of green. I handed over his god garb.

"I thought I told you I'm not wearing this," he said.

"Put it on," said Athena.

He stalked outside. "This is shark weather, you know," he shouted.

Through the open shutter: the ocean, slate grey and rough. Looked like rain soon.

Athena traced her tattoo and stared vacantly at the far wall.

At 8:00 on the dot our two old biddies crossed the parking lot and stopped in front of our stand. Gucci Glasses touched her hair and said to Botox, "D'you think this is it?"

"Mrs. Horowitz?" I asked. Neither of them seemed to hear me.

"Eileen Horowitz?" I tried again.

Botox dug around in her purse for something and I wondered if they were both blind and deaf. I imagined Poseidon poking them with the trident he refused to hold.

"Hey lady!" shouted Athena. The biddies snapped to.

"You don't need to shout," said Botox. "We were just looking for our coupon."

Both women spoke with a heavy New York accent.

"Your coupon?" I asked.

"Yes," said Botox. "The one from the newspaper."

I hated myself for those stupid vouchers. *Two-For-One Fishing! Don's Deep Sea Fishing!* It'd been a last-ditch effort to get summer customers. The result? Twice as many unhappy fishless customers.

Botox slid a rumpled piece of newspaper across the counter along with her ID: Eileen Horowitz. Athena handed Eileen's license back and checked Gucci Glasses' (Gail Leibowitz).

I made a metal note:

Botox = Eileen

Gucci Glasses = Gail

Eileen and Gail.

"Alright, ladies," Athena said. "Are you ready to set sail?"

The old ladies squeezed under the overhang and peered at the sky.

"Do the fish bite in the rain?" Eileen asked. "It looks like rain."

Poseidon peeked his head around the corner. "Yes."

"Who are you?" asked Gail. "Are you the captain?"

"No, I'm the captain," I said.

"Then who's he?"

Poseidon shot a glance at Athena, held a finger up at the ladies, and disappeared behind the shack. He emerged in full-sheeted get-up and endured the ensuing flash photography.

"I'm Poseidon," he said. The ladies laughed.

Athena scowled. "Let's go," she said. "Right this way, ladies." She headed toward the van.

"Trust me," she whispered loudly. "He's no god."

I filled the van's tank with the gas can, then ushered everyone over, hoping the rain would hold off for a couple more hours.

Athena loaded fly rods and tackle into the back, then climbed in the passenger side door and left Poseidon to the old ladies. We pulled out of the parking lot and she glared at the road ahead.

"Your eyes are glassy," I said. "You okay?"

“I’m fine,” she said. “And my eyes aren’t glassy.” She rubbed her eyes. “Lucille’s engine is still shot, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Fly fishing will be interesting on Wilhelmina,” she said.

Behind us, Gail and Eileen talked over Poseidon, ignoring him entirely. Apparently Gail was going through a late-in-life divorce and Eileen thought it would be good for her to get out on the water for a few hours. Poseidon leaned past them and kissed Athena's shoulder. She shoved him back into his seat. Hard.

Old Wilhelmina's a twenty-eight foot center console, a little water-stained, but otherwise clean. It took a couple turns to get the outboard running, and I prayed the whole time that it wouldn't die on me. In the end we made it out to sea, Poseidon in his sheet, Athena with those legs of hers, the old biddies in their hats and life vests, and me in an old Guy Harvey shirt. I handed everyone rain ponchos. At least Poseidon looked stupider than I did, but damn if he didn't try to own that sheet. He stood hands on hips so that it hid his belly. The shark bite wasn't bleeding through the new gauze yet, so I could almost imagine what he must've looked like before the shark went after him.

Water sloughed off Wilhelmina's sides, curling behind her, frothy against the grey water. The wind buffeted us from side to side. I adjusted left, then right, then left to keep us on course. Poseidon sat dead center in the boat, head between his knees, muttering something or other to himself. Then there it was: a floating mass of dead palm fronds and old wood. A fruitful blemish on the great face of the ocean. Here's where we'd find dolphin. Since Gail and Eileen were two-for-one I hoped that here was where we'd get tip money,

where they'd decide that *the girls* just *had* to come out on the water because what an *experience*.

Athena came down from the helm, bumping Poseidon on her way to gear up Eileen and Gail.

"For commander of the seven seas, you sure are being a wuss," she said.

She was right. Every time the boat rocked he clutched the spear gun tighter, ducked his head lower, until finally Eileen stepped over and laid a hand on his shoulder.

"My Hubert used to get the sea sickness. Do you have the sea sickness? I have some Dramamine in my bag. Let me give you some Dramamine."

Poseidon raised his face, drawn and sad. Eileen cupped his cheek, ran a hand through his hair, murmured something about Hubert again.

"Can I talk to you for a minute?" I nodded toward the console and Eileen offered Poseidon a hand to help him up. He stood hunched and shaky. The wind wrapped his god sheet tight around his body.

"What?" he asked. I noticed he was breathing a little hard, and I felt sort of bad, but the oil would be here tomorrow morning, would suffocate the fish and kill my business.

"Look," I said. "Can you get these people some fish?" And here I got an idea. "Maybe if we use a net we can catch a ton of them and save them and set up a pond or something, you know? So when the ocean can't be fished at least our pond can."

Sweat broke out at the backs of my knees. Poseidon watched as Athena showed Gail how to cast.

"Keep the wrist straight," she said. "Ten and two."

"If you can't, that's fine. But Athena..."

Black clouds filled the sky. I dug five lifejackets out of the empty livewell and handed one to Poseidon. He dropped it on deck.

"Are you serious, man? Of course I can get fish. But you'll never keep them alive in a pond," said Poseidon. He kicked the lifejacket, disgusted and righteous and god-like.

He sat in the console chair and closed his eyes, rubbed his fingers together, cracked each knuckle. His face grew red and he began to sweat.

Seagulls wheeled above us, white against the dark sky.

"Just give me a second," he said.

Trembling, Poseidon rose and walked to the side of the boat, steeling himself against the bigger waves the way a surfer might—wide stance, palms down. He lay on his stomach and slipped his arms beneath the railing until his fingers trailed in the water. And for a while he stayed like that.

When Eileen came over with the Dramamine, her eyes went wide.

"Oh my God," she said. "His side."

Poseidon's blood dripped, drop after drop, on deck. Next to him, Gail doubled over with a fish on her line. We use fly rods when we want customers to feel the fight more. Fly rods make fish feel bigger. Since dolphin school near the surface, we thought, hell, give the ladies a show if the fish'll bite.

"Jackson would love this," Gail whispered. I'm guessing Jackson was her soon-to-be-ex husband.

She gripped her pole so tight all ten knuckles went white. She squared her stance, leaned back against the weight of the fish and reeled. The line screamed.

“Check the drag,” I said. I hurried over to her, imagining the line snapping, imagining an impossible marlin getting away. Gail’s brow scrunched with concentration, her eyes sharp and bright.

“Got him,” she breathed.

She pulled back and the fish jumped, a bright spot of green and blue against all the grey. A dolphin. It smacked back against the surface and the line went slack.

“Reel in slowly,” I said.

The line went tight again as the fish dove. The rod tip bent toward the surface.

“He’s going under the boat,” I said. “Pull up, pull up.”

But the rod only had so much give and Gail leaned far over the railing, then there she went, a pale streak of varicose veins and sun block dropping over the edge, sinking like one of the sand-heavy jellyfish of my childhood. I had to give her credit for holding onto the rod. Most first-timers would've let go.

Thunder left my ears ringing.

We all froze on deck.

“Shit,” whispered Athena.

Eileen's scream kicked her into action, and Athena shoved me into movement.

“Get Gail,” she said.

"Gail!" Eileen screamed. She peered over the edge, searching for her friend.

Poseidon sat slumped and bleeding against the railing.

Athena sprinted to him and I sprinted starboard, leaning as far over the water as I could, trying to grasp hold of Gail's hand. She was too far below the surface.

So I jumped.

Cold, dark water billowed through my shirt, buoying me, inflating my shorts. My shoes slipped off, and my hat. Water moved like fingers through my hair, scraped through my beard. I swear the water spoke to me and I closed my eyes and listened. Footsteps from the boat. Are we really that loud? I wondered. Can shoes make so much noise? No wonder no one catches fish anymore. Fish. I opened my eyes and there was Gail being pulled along by her fishing rod. She'd lost a shoe and it floated past my head as I groped my way through the water, clawed my way toward her. Salt stung my eyes and I reached for her, squinted to see what was pulling her slim body down down down. There was no bottom, no surface, only ocean. Only me and Gail and the quiet. I remembered what Poseidon had said about this being shark weather and goosebumps popped up on my skin.

I pumped my arms, kicked my legs, made my muscles burn. I touched her ankle, cool and thin and fragile. She turned to me, gave me a thumbs-up and an empty smile. She'd lost her dentures. And then her body dispersed. She became so many bubbles and I was left clutching nothing but my own thumb. The fly rod drifted deeper and deeper and gone.

Rain battered the surface above me. I kicked. I broke through to air. I breathed and breathed and breathed. Then I looked. Then I saw the blood.

"Don!" Athena shouted. "Donovan!"

Her arms were covered. Deep red trickled over Wilhelmina's sides and I swam through the murk, trying not to think of platelets, trying not to think of sharks. Eileen pulled me up, though I don't know how.

"Where is she?" Eileen asked. "Gail."

I slumped on deck. Drops of rain fell from her nose.

"I don't know," I said.

Her face crumpled. She swiped a hand over her face then pointed a finger at me.

"Get a good lawyer," she said.

Then she stepped through the blood to Poseidon.

His chest heaved. Someone had taken off the sheet and there he was in his wetsuit and flippers, black and yellow in all that red. Athena hugged me and even in all this mess I loved the feel of her breasts against me.

"You're okay," she said.

She sat at Poseidon's head, doing her best to keep the blood out of his hair. His side burbled and my stomach turned. I'm not proud of it, but I puked over the side.

"It was a bull shark," Poseidon said. I knelt next to him, pressed my hands to his waist.

"One of my favorites," he said. "They eat damn near everything, can live in salt water, brackish water, fresh water."

Eileen gripped the railing, looking out toward nothing.

The boat rocked and lightning arced the sky.

"What happened to Gail?" I asked. "Where'd she go?"

Athena came back with two towels grimy with bait and dried fish slime. They didn't last long against Poseidon's bite.

"Who knows, man?" he said.

"What do you mean you don't know? Aren't you supposed to know?"

My temples throbbed. A lost customer; no landed fish; an imminent oil spill. My business was over. Done. Gone.

Poseidon laughed. "Shit just happens." There was blood in his teeth.

He ran his fingers down his side. The bite was ragged and writhing, like the flesh was trying to knit itself back together.

We'd gone about a hundred feet before the outboard quit. The flare sputtered out three feet above the water. Mostly we kept the flashlight off. Why bother wasting battery when we knew what was around us? Four different sets of breathing: Eileen's, soft and shuddery; Athena's, decisive, intentional; Poseidon's, long and wet; my own, a hollow sound in my ears. Bits of driftwood smacked against Wilhelmina's sides; palm fronds scraped her hull. Waves washed the deck clean of blood.

After a while we grew used to the sounds, we grew sensitive to subtle changes, so when Eileen swore the water sounded heavier, I turned the flashlight on and held it over the side. Dark water, but water's always dark before daylight hits. Another wave washed over us, streaking the deck brown.

"Is that oil?" asked Eileen. "Oh my God, that's oil."

By late morning, tar balls would wash ashore, beach-goers would be horrified, would then get over their horror and move on to golfing or air boating or bargain-hunting. They'd build new theme parks to house the tourists. My eyes burned and I turned so Athena wouldn't see.

Her hand on my shoulder. Her cheek on my neck, cool on my sunburn. The flashlight beam swung. Tiny glints of orange and red, hundreds of pelicans floating around us, soaking from brown to black.

"Damn it," Poseidon breathed. "Fine. I'm coming."

"Who are you talking to?" I asked.

A shuffle, then a splash. A small "oh" from Eileen.

In the beam of the flashlight we saw him sink, saw the bull shark come for him. The water thrashed then bubbled then went still. Sunrise came at 5:45 a.m. Around six, a battered party yacht towed us to shore where the water was still clean. *The Neptune*, it was called. They'd been stuck out in the storm, too, and wanted to see the fish we'd butchered to get ourselves so bloody.

"Must've been marlin, eh?" said one balding man. He flashed us a grin. "A little on-deck sushi?"

"Dolphin," said Eileen. She didn't bother clarifying. I think she enjoyed their horror. We scanned our wake for signs of Gail the whole way back.

I still get a Christmas card every year from Eileen addressed to Don's Deep Sea Fishing even though her lawyer put me out of business. The card always has some rendition of Poseidon on the front. This year he wore a Santa hat. Last year he drove a sleigh led by seals.

Athena and I make ends meet. Disaster tours bus through to see the oil slick now, to watch the waves roll in black and streak back to the sandy edges. We sell the tourists lemonade and listen to the bus drivers blare statistics through their megaphones.

"Florida's coastal activities once generated \$13,035,087,800," they say. "Not so much anymore, folks. Not so much anymore."

While the tourists take pictures of tar balls, laugh at their black feet, buy cheap magnets and salt and pepper shakers from the tourist shops, Athena and I see to Old Wilhelmina. The oil still won't come off. We've tried everything. When passersby ask

about the other stains, the redder ones, we tell them nevermind those. And when they keep at us to answer, we tell them she once carried a god.

Beware: Sturgeon

Quetzal and I picked our way down the clay embankment, past the sign screaming at us to **BE AWARE. BOATERS SERIOUSLY INJURED BY JUMPING STURGEON.**

"Look at you, Ms. Rebel," he said. "Sneaking out and shit." He grinned and slung a tan arm around my shoulders.

Suarez crouched over Carrine on the shore, ran his hands over her faded yellow hull.

"Dude, I don't think it's going to ride," said Suarez. He stood back and squinted at the jet ski.

"What do you mean 'ride'?" I asked. "There's no way it's fixed yet. We found it three weeks ago."

"She's got a point," said Suarez.

Quetzal bent to look over Carrine. "She's fine," he said. "I did the spark plugs last night."

He walked a circle around the jet ski, bending every once in awhile to poke at something, as if examining *the* Carrine—the one with owl eyes and straight teeth.

"I already checked it," said Suarez.

Quetzal stood. "Today," he said. "I'm going to feel up a sturgeon. Fishing contest's coming up."

Quetzal always made everything into a grand announcement.

"You're resorting to feeling up fish now? Because Corrine won't let you get under her shirt?" I crossed my arms and leveled Quetzal with my eyes.

He took three quick steps toward me, dug around in his pockets, then handed me his pocketknife.

"Hold this," he said. "I don't want to lose it. And don't be jealous."

I rolled my eyes. "Yeah. Right. That's it. The DNR comes through every twenty minutes, Quetzal," I said.

"They're switching shifts right now. No worries."

He stripped off his shirt, wheeled Carrine around, and shoved off into the water.

"Idiot," I muttered.

Suarez sat in the grass. "Tomorrow he's going to want to touch ten of the damn things."

"I swear his brain's an incubator of stupid sometimes," I said. I sat next to Suarez and he moved over so our knees wouldn't touch.

"Incubator?" said Suarez. He raised an eyebrow at me. "What are you, a farmer?"

"Shut up," I said. "I'm studying for the SAT."

"That's not till the end of the year, goody-goody."

I flipped Quetzal's knife open, then closed.

"Yeah, well, when I pass and you're stuck working at Lowes, I'll be sure to write from UF."

Suarez rolled his eyes. Quetzal crisscrossed the water, coming close enough to spray us.

"Quetzal!" shouted Suarez. "You're never going to touch one if you don't cut that shit out!"

I checked my watch. In half an hour my mother would check my room, see me gone, then check for the rowboat, see *it* gone, and brainstorm a new way to ground me.

Quetzal killed the motor and sat in the center of the river, waiting. I twisted his shirt around my hand.

"Did you bring a flashlight?" asked Suarez.

I shook my head. "No."

In the fading light, a sturgeon leapt past Quetzal, hanging in mid-air for full seconds before crashing into the river. The second one got close enough to knock the handlebars on the way down. The jet ski rocked on the water.

Suarez sat back and laughed. "I predict a face-plant."

Quetzal leaned far over the water, stretching his fingers out and away.

"Holy shit," said Suarez. "He's going to do it. He's seriously going for it."

"He's just trying to impress Carrine," I said. I closed my eyes. The last rays of sun warmed my cheeks. "He even named our—*our*—jet ski after her, Suarez."

"Carrine's not even here," said Suarez. "Plus, she's a cock-tease."

"Yeah, well," I said. "All I know is he's wearing button-down shirts now."

"Whatever. Are you watching this?"

I opened my eyes. A sturgeon flung itself out of the water and twisted in the air.

"Look at that thing," said Suarez. "It's got to be at least eight feet long."

Quetzal reached and reached.

"He's going to fall off," I said. I poked holes in the mud next to me.

The sturgeon collided with him, slammed into him with the sound of a head smacking concrete. Quetzal and the fish tangled together, limbs and fins. They hit the water as one.

"Fuck," I said. "Oh, fuck."

We waited a minute.

"Suarez, he's not moving."

"I know," he said.

He ran a hand through his curly hair. "He better not be playing around."

We plunged into the river.

The night before the funeral, Señora rowed out to my family's houseboat. The weight of our boat shifted, then stabilized, as Señora stepped on board. My mother watched from the porthole while I tied off her rowboat.

"Hello, Jae," said Señora. "May I sit with you?"

"Sure," I said. I sat on the edge of the deck, my toes dangling inches from the surface. Señora tucked her legs beneath her skirts.

"My mom's probably listening through the glass," I said.

Señora smiled. "It's what mothers do."

I brushed a moth off my shirt and watched it fly toward the porthole light.

"I want to ask you something," said Señora. She looked me in the eye.

"Okay," I said.

"Would you speak tomorrow? For Quetzal?"

I picked at a sliver of deck wood. We both stared out toward the white limestone banks.

"Not Suarez?" I asked.

She shook her head. "No. Quetzal trusted you."

My stomach clenched.

"Because of Hawkinsville?" I asked.

"Of course," said Señora.

I tossed splintered pieces of wood into the water. I knew we were both thinking of Amelia. Of the way her ashes floated over the Hawkinsville City steamboat's creaking wreckage.

"I don't think I'd do a good job," I said.

"I'm sure you'd do just fine," Señora said. Wisps of long, dark hair escaped from her bun. She let them fall in her eyes before tucking them behind her ears.

The boat rocked beneath us.

"I'm failing public speaking. The last time I spoke in front of a group of people I passed out. In front of my whole class."

Señora was quiet for a moment. "Oh, honey."

"My mom doesn't know yet," I said. "Please don't tell her."

She laid a thin, brown hand on my knee. My skin looked so pale beneath her fingers. I shrugged and managed a half-smile.

"I don't think I could talk about Quetzal in front of a bunch of people."

Señora hugged me tight. She smelled like cinnamon. My throat tightened and my eyes burned.

"You can," she said. "Everyone there loves you and loves Quetzal. There will be no judge."

A sturgeon broke the water in front of us, sailed in our direction, and fell short. It hit the side of the boat with a loud thump. Señora gasped and pulled me back against the deck.

Her grip stung my wrist. I twisted loose. She took my face in her hands, her back straight against the boat wall.

"Are you alright?" she asked.

Her dark eyes, normally squinted from smiling, sat wide and unblinking in her face.

The door slammed open and my mother's frazzled head peered out the door.

"What was that?" she asked.

"Sturgeon," I said. "Everything's fine."

"You're okay?" she asked. She twisted her hands nervously.

I nodded. "I'll come inside in a minute, okay? We'll have tea."

My mother cut her eyes over to Señora. "I'm sorry about your son," she said. She disappeared inside.

Señora crossed herself and kissed my forehead. We leaned against the outer wall of the boat, our legs tucked close to our bodies. The water went still again.

"Jae," said Señora. She took my hands. "Please speak tomorrow. It would mean so much."

I thought about all the times she'd fed me tostones and pork, all the times Quetzal stuck up for me.

"Okay," I said. "I'll try."

She kissed my cheeks. "Thank you."

Señora stepped into her rowboat and settled behind the oars. She sat straight and tall as I untied her and pushed her off. I leaned over the side and searched our hull for cracks. My mother's face hovered in the window.

I stood at the funeral pulpit and counted faces. Seventy-six people watched me learn the impossibility of delivering a eulogy for my best friend. Construction workers banged on the roof of the church. Fine white flakes fell down the front of my black dress and dusted the podium. Suarez watched me from the first pew, rolling his tie around his fingers then letting it loose.

Palm fronds brushed against the stained glass windows and sent a tightness up my throat from the pit of my chest. The A.C. unit turned on, buzzed for several minutes, then clicked off. Someone coughed toward the back. My dress clung to my legs in the heat.

I tapped the mic once. No feedback. I stared at the words on the paper, words that meant Quetzal was gone. When the doors creaked open, everyone turned.

"Sorry. Sorry," whispered the girl in the grey dress.

Carrine took my empty seat beside Suarez.

"I was sitting there," I said. The words echoed across the church before I could think to stop them.

"Oh," said Carrine. She scooted over a little.

Señora smoothed her dress over her knees. The tips of my fingers went numb and my head went swimmy. I stared at Carrine and tried to see in her what Quetzal saw.

Thin blonde hair.

Slim grey dress.

Knobby knees.

Obnoxious eyebrows.

"Quetzal was kind," I said. The words felt stale on my tongue.

I clutched Quetzal's eulogy in my fist and sweated through the paper. Carrine started crying—big ugly sobs. Overdramatic sobs.

"Quetzal," I said, louder. "He—"

"Jae," said Señora and my stomach went nauseous. Red candles burned around Quetzal's casket, a hunk of the Spanish moss he loved so much curling across the wood like a woman's hair.

I wiped my palms on my dress.

"Quetzal loved his little sister," I said. My fingers tingled and my vision blurred. I closed my eyes and kept them closed.

"I miss him," I said.

Heels clicked up the steps to the pulpit and then Señora's hands were on my shoulders.

"Come down, honey," she said, her voice thick.

I opened my eyes a sliver and stepped down from the pulpit. I handed Señora Quetzal's eulogy.

"I'm sorry," I said.

She hugged me tight, her thin body pressed against my own. I wanted to curl up under the pew until every last person was gone.

After the funeral I dreamed about faces. Quetzal's blank face peering up from the darkness of his wooden box. Señora's face, drawn down with mourning. The smell of dirt all over my hands. I woke at two in the morning, sweaty in my sheets, my stomach in fist-sized knots. The boat floor swayed beneath me. My mother coughed in her sleep on the couch. I made tea and tried to forget that it was the Suwannee's dark water I drank.

*

We buried Quetzal a week before the river blessing. I found a spot in the grass near the grill tent and waited for Suarez. Quetzal loved the river blessing as much as he loved the spring Red Belly Festival.

"Only difference is at the river blessing, you don't have to catch your own food. Just bring burgers instead of bait for fish," he told me once. Until I met Quetzal, I'd never been to a river blessing.

People filtered past wearing jeans and sneakers. Suarez sat beside me in basketball shorts and Jordans.

"No one's going to swim this year," I said.

Suarez shook his head. "Check out all the signs they put up."

BEWARE: STURGEON signs stood every three feet along the riverbank.

"I want a burger," said Suarez. He stared up at the smoking grills. "You want one?"

"I'm not hungry," I said.

He sat back and picked grass. I pulled Quetzal's pocketknife out and flipped it open.

"You still have that?" asked Suarez.

I nodded. "Yeah." It felt warm and heavy in my palm. I placed it in the grass between Suarez and I. We stared at it. It burned between us.

"How's SAT studying going?" Suarez asked. "Learn any more bigass words?"

" 'Auxiliary'," I said. "And 'esoteric.'"

"This blows," said Suarez.

Around four, Father Rawlins stepped up to the water. He didn't lift his clerical robes to reveal board shorts. No one yelled "Hey, Pops!" and tossed him a beer. He simply stood ankle deep in the river and stared out at the rolling sturgeon.

"We bless this river as our fathers and mothers did, and their mothers and fathers before them, and before them, and before them," he said.

I mouthed these words along with him as I had a dozen times before. They slipped easily from between my lips. Mosquitoes bit my mosquito bites. I slathered mud along my limbs. Father Rawlins let a palmful of water slip through his fingers. In the middle of the river, sturgeon leapt and splashed.

"This river has been good to us always," Father Rawlins continued. "It has quenched our thirst and fed our commerce and filled our bellies."

Señora Williams sat in a chair at the edge of the water, her legs tucked beneath her skirts. Every so often she set her glass down and shook condensation from her hands, but mostly she kept her eyes on the pines and palms and scrub lining the opposite bank. Quetzal's jetski was gone, towed away to the junkyard across town.

Carrine stepped out of the crowd. She wore a white sundress and a pearl ribbon in her hair.

"Today the river blesses this young woman," said Father Rawlins. "Today God gives her new life."

Father Rawlins spread his arms out and beckoned Carrine forward. She stepped between two signs, wading into the water until the hem of her dress soaked through. Father Rawlins led her into deeper water. He pushed her under. Two of our classmates threw a football back and forth over a beached DNR boat. People at the grill tent turned their heads

toward the river, then resumed their conversations. A sturgeon leapt a few yards from Father Rawlins, then fell back through the surface.

Carrine emerged dripping from the river. Father Rawlins followed. A few people clapped. Father Rawlins took Señora's hands, bowed his head to hers, and blessed her.

Señora held his hands in silence.

I picked a clump of Spanish moss apart one strand at a time and watched Carrine wring out her hair. She picked her way toward us through the crowd. All along the way, people placed hands on her shoulders, fingered her hair. When she reached us she sat with her back to the river.

"Hi," said Suarez.

Carrine ignored him and stared at me. "You're not going to apologize?"

"For what?" I asked. My gut twisted.

"You know what," she said. "Quetzal was my friend, too."

"Is that why you baptized yourself?" I asked. "In his memory?"

"You don't know anything about me," said Carrine. She shivered. I could see her bra through her dress, lacy, probably mail-ordered from Victoria's Secret.

"I don't need to know any more than I already do."

"Jae," said Suarez. "You know it's not her fault."

My face flushed. I wanted to smack him.

"She was always mean to him," I said. I turned to her. "You were always mean to him. Even after Amelia died. And don't pretend you didn't know. The whole town knew."

I picked up Quetzal's pocket knife. "I have to go."

*

I slipped on flippers and a snorkel mask near the U.S. 90 bridge. Without a scuba tank I'd have to hold my breath. I waded into the river and swam to the middle. Every so often a sturgeon launched itself out of the water and my heart beat a little faster.

I ducked my head under and kicked until I could just see the top of the wreck. City of Hawkinsville. The old steamboat had been Quetzal's last obsession. Before the sturgeon. I'm not sure why he never told Suarez about our dives.

The boiler area was our favorite. I dove, held my breath hard, and squinted into the sun-greened water. There were the algae covered boilers, round and fuzzy, and there was the bit of railing where Quetzal scratched his sister's name. I kicked deeper. My lungs burned. I surfaced for air. I think what fascinated Quetzal was the fact that such destruction could be buried under so much still water.

Cars whizzed across the bridge.

The sun beat on my head.

I gripped the pocket knife tight, breathed deep, and dove.

I kicked my way down through the layer of warm water and entered the cold. Goosebumps peppered my skin. I moved along the railing, quickly, hand over hand, searching for Amelia's name: **AMELIA WILLIAMS, 2 YRS.** The scratch marks were old and deep, grown over with algae. She would have been six now. I scraped the green away with my knife and cleared a patch beside her name.

I'd never held my breath this long before. It hurt. Carefully, I cut Quetzal's name into the rotting metal. Then: **16 YRS.** I stared at the lines until I saw black spots. I kicked for the surface. When the sturgeon slammed into the back of my knees, for a second I thought it was

Quetzal playing around the way he used to—sneaking up beneath me like a shark or an alligator, using his fingernails as teeth.

I flailed into deeper water. Beneath the surface shadow shapes bent and swayed with the current, dampened at the edges like oversaturated watercolors, rubbed like Quetzal's charcoal drawings. My breath bubbled up in fat, shifting globs. My existence became a whorl of mud. I watched tiny specks float against the sunlight.

I held my breath until my lungs burned. Water filled my ears, deadened my thoughts.
A calmness.

The muffled rush of the current.

A pale face floated nearby with Quetzal's dark eyes and thick aquatic lips, lips perfect for bottom-feeding. Thick whiskers brushed my face. I thought to kick.

Up, I thought. *Up, up, up.*

On shore, I threw up streams of water, inhaled, breathed deep, tasted that humid jungle air like it was key lime pie, sweet and sour and delicious.

At school people avoided me. Whole sections of the cafeteria cleared out when Suarez and I sat down. We were outcasts.

"It's because of me," I said.

"Yeah, maybe," he said. "You were kind of a bitch to Carrine."

I bit harder into my apple.

Carrine started the rumors about Quetzal when he was alive, so I knew it must have been Carrine who started the rumors about his death: Quetzal steered the jet ski into the sturgeon on purpose. Quetzal jumped off in the middle of the river, wearing weights.

Quetzal's body was found half-eaten by alligators because Suarez and I didn't tell the cops in time. Because of her, our classmates whispered about us, whispered about Quetzal. Bullshit.

I got sick of everyone's pity. People who didn't avoid me, stared at me, patted me on the shoulder. A girl I hadn't spoken to since grade school hugged me in front of Target. At home, my mother made my favorite foods because it was just the two of us, because first it was my dad and brother in the car accident and then it was Quetzal. Eating mashed potatoes felt like swallowing a wet blanket. I missed Adobo seasoning and sazón.

"Eat more," my mother said.

I wished Señora would talk to me. We never ran into each other anymore.

On the two-month anniversary of Quetzal's death, I snuck out and rowed for Señora's house. Deep water swallowed my oars. Ibises flocked to my left, dipped their beaks in mud for food. A great blue heron croaked and took off from an old oak. Far off down the river, red and blue lights glowed from the top of a DNR boat. I dragged my rowboat up the bank and knocked on her door before I could think too much about it.

Señora came to the door in a deep green shawl, the mascara around her eyes a little smeared.

"Jae," she said.

I hugged her. "I'm sorry for messing up my speech."

She laid her cheek on top of my head, rubbed my back.

"Come inside," she said. "Sit."

Señora scooped *arroz com pollo* onto a yellow plate and placed it in front of me. I downed the whole thing—warm, salty, rich—in under a minute. I was starving.

"Eat more. You're too thin," she said, putting more food on my plate.

Her small home overlooked the river. I hadn't been over since Quetzal's wake.

Señora filled the coffeepot with dark grounds.

"I read your eulogy today," said Señora. "He loved you, too, Jae. You were his best friend."

"I miss him," I said.

Señora was silent for a moment, wiping her hands absently on her apron.

"He was a good boy," she said.

"I went to Hawkinsville," I said.

Beans sputtered in the pot and Señora reached to turn the burner down.

"Come look," she said. She pointed to the ibises roosting in the trees on the riverbank closest to the window.

"Do you want to know something?" she asked.

I nodded.

"Birds are only beautiful to us because they are beautiful to each other," she said.

"Quetzal told me that once," I said.

Señora smiled. "You know. You should really call me Acindina." She took my hand. "Now tell me how my Amelia is doing."

We sipped bitter coffee and tried not to cry.

I found Suarez by his locker the next day talking to Carrine again.

"We're going fishing," said Suarez. "We're going to catch a sturgeon. We owe it to Quetzal."

"You're going fishing with *her*?" I asked.

Carrine scrunched up her nose and slapped me hard across the face.

"What the hell?" I yelled. My face stung.

"You don't know anything about Quetzal and me," she said. "You don't know. So stop acting like you're in some special little club."

"You barely knew Quetzal," I said. "All you did was make him chase you."

Carrine's face crumpled.

"Oh come on," I said. "Are you really going to start crying again? No one's buying it."

"Jae," Suarez said. "Cut it out."

I couldn't stop. I hated her even though I knew I had no right or reason to hate her.

Someone slammed the locker next to me and we all jumped.

"I have class," said Carrine. She disappeared into a classroom down the hall.

I turned to Suarez. "What the hell? She hit me."

"What's up with you, Jae? You're acting psycho lately." He crossed his arms over his chest.

The late bell rang before I could find the words to explain the hole I felt swallowing my insides.

"See you at lunch," said Suarez. "In the library."

Suarez, Carrine, and I sat between the back bookshelves and pored over articles and photos and books about the Gulf sturgeon. We learned the grey-brown of their prehistoric bodies, the peach of their pectoral fins. We memorized their solid armor—the skeletons they

wore outside their bodies. We discovered their lack of teeth and the way they bottom-feed by suction.

Suarez looked up from an old fishing guide.

"They're listed as threatened. It's illegal to catch and kill them."

Carrine slid a photo into the middle of our circle. "Look at this," she said.

I ignored her, but after a minute I had to look.

The photo showed a young woman sitting in a wrecked boat, her face swollen, her eyes blacked and bruised. Blood trickled from her hairline. I flipped it over. Suarez looked a little pale.

"What?" said Carrine. "I'm just saying, that's what sturgeon are capable of."

"Quetzal looked worse," I said.

Carrine bit her lip. "I didn't know it hit him in the head. I thought it just knocked him over. That he drowned." She twisted her hands in her lap. Had she not hit me in the hallway, I would've felt bad for her.

"Yeah, well," I said. I stared at the back of the photo. "We can't do anything illegal. We graduate in May. College applications ask about that kind of thing."

"Seriously?" said Suarez.

"I can't stay here my whole life," I said. "Not in a place where people like her exist."

The bell rang. We left the pile of books on the floor.

After school, I slung my backpack and a bag of groceries (milk, bread, chicken breasts) into the rowboat and set off for home. My mother hardly left the boat anymore, so I wasn't surprised to see her sitting on deck in a swimsuit. I tied off and lugged my bags up.

"What are you reading?" I asked.

"Do you really want to know?" she asked.

"Yeah," I said. Lying on her beach towel, my mother looked almost normal.

She held up her book. *The Search for Certainty: Phenomenology, Logic, and the Philosophy of Mathematics*.

"Oh," I said. "Didn't that guy you used to teach with write that?"

Mom locked eyes with me for a moment. "Yes, but he's dead now."

I headed for the door. A jagged hole a little shorter than me opened into the side of our home.

"What happened to the boat?"

Mom looked up from her book, eyes sleepy with sun. "Sturgeon."

I dropped my bags and stepped over the broken board edges. There, in the dim living room, lay a five-foot sturgeon. I leaned down and touched its back. The scutes felt dry and rocky beneath my fingers. I followed its body to the head. Its gills fanned in and out, searching for breath. I grabbed it by the tail and pulled back toward the opening. The fish whipped its body to the right, then the left, a giant writhing muscle. I lost my grip and fell onto the edge of the hole. A nail dug into my arm.

"Dammit!" I said.

"You okay?" asked my mom.

"I'm fine," I shouted back.

I stood and walked over to the sturgeon. It lay on its side in the sun, one fin waving in the air. Warm blood trickled down the back of my arm. I stared at the fish's soft, white belly.

I kicked it.

"Stupid," I said.

I kicked it again. And again. I kicked until my leg was tired and my arm was too sore to lift and the sturgeon wasn't moving anymore. Its gills lifted twice then went still. I nudged it with my toe. Nothing.

"Shit," I said. "Oh, shit. Oh, no."

I bent over the fish and felt along its side. It didn't move. I fumbled for my cell phone.

"Meet me at the bend, okay?" I told Suarez.

"You okay?" he asked.

"Just meet me there in fifteen," I said.

I hung up and stuck my head outside the hole. My mother flipped pages. I dragged the fish into the sun and dug some rope out of a kitchen cabinet. The sturgeon's body scraped against the deck. I shoved it to the edge of the boat and over. It floated. I hopped in the rowboat and pulled the sturgeon toward me.

"Jae?" said my mother. She peered over the railing at me.

"I'm getting the fish off our boat," I said. I wrapped coils of rope around its bony body and through the oar locks. The fish swiveled its eye around at me. My stomach lurched.

"I'll be back before dinner," I said.

I stretched the oars out into the water. My arms ached from the added weight of the sturgeon. I hoped that moving through the river would filter water through its gills. I hoped it would live. It had to live.

I allowed myself to think of my father. Just this once. To think of the chant he taught me when he sat me behind the oars as a kid.

When I die, please bury me deep.

Just place two oars down by my feet.

Don't cry for me. Don't shed no tear.

Just pack my coffin with rowing gear.

I breathed air into my muscles and cut water till the middle of the river where I paused to check that the sturgeon's gills were still moving. I splashed water over my burning shoulders. The slow current barely moved us off course. Here and there a sturgeon rolled the surface. An osprey wheeled above, chirping.

"Alright, fish. You and me," I said. I stretched my fingers over the oar handles and dragged us forward.

When I reached shallower water, I untied one rope and then the other. The sturgeon floated to the surface. I sat on the edge of the boat. It tipped dangerously close to the water under my weight. I jumped in. The sturgeon's pale belly floated above me. I surfaced and wrapped my arms around it. The fish twisted a little in my grip, but not enough to fight away from me.

I pulled the sturgeon through the water with me. Its body stretched nearly the length of my own. Its whiskers trailed against my arm. The water stung my nail wound. The sturgeon's muscles tensed and my heart sped up. It wasn't strong enough to move.

Suarez waved at me from shore. Carrine stood with her hands on her hips.

"What are you doing?" shouted Suarez. He waded into the water. Carrine stripped to her bikini (her stupid skinny body) and followed.

“Why’s she here?” I asked. “Go home, Carrine,” I told her.

“She was with me when you called,” Suarez said.

I glared at him. I wanted to punch him. The fish squirmed.

“Just help me, Suarez.”

Carrine came to the edge of the water.

"Wow," she said. "It's a sturgeon."

"No shit, Sherlock," said Suarez. "What happened?"

"It hit my house," I said. And then I started to laugh. I couldn't stop. It came up out of me unbidden. "A sturgeon hit my house, Suarez."

He laughed, too, and treaded water beside me, ran his hand along its side. Its gills took in water every so often. It swished its tail a little.

"It's moving, you guys," said Carrine. She looked nervous.

"We have to get it strong enough to swim," I said.

"If we do that it's going to hurt you," said Suarez.

"We'll be careful," I said.

"You helping, Carrine?" asked Suarez.

She took a deep breath, then plunged into the water. "Yes."

"Let's pass it around. Maybe that'll help," I said. I pushed the sturgeon out in front of me a little, then shoved it toward Suarez, forcing it to swim the little it could. Suarez swam out to meet it the rest of the way. He pushed it toward Carrine.

“Don’t kill it,” I told her.

“You’re such a bitch,” she said. She pushed the sturgeon at me all wrong and it careened off to the side.

“See? See what you did?” I said.

I swam after it and caught it by the tail. I tucked it under my arm so that its gills brushed open and closed against my skin.

"Wake up," I told the sturgeon. "I'm sorry."

I passed the fish back to Suarez. Suarez passed it to Carrine and she to me. We pushed it back and forth, back and forth, until with a burst of energy, the fish sped into me, knocking the wind out of my chest. I choked. Gasp. It hovered in front of me. I turned the fish around and shoved it toward open water. It shot off then stopped. "Suarez, push it again," I said.

Suarez swam out and shoved the fish. It bolted and sunk beneath the surface before reappearing again.

"It's too far," said Carrine

I swam out to the sturgeon, approached it carefully. Its scutes looked brown in the water. It looked me in the eye. I pushed it.

"Go away," I said.

It thrashed at the surface, rolled, then came to rest in front of Carrine. She shrieked.

“It almost hit me.”

I swam at the sturgeon again, but it was gone before I swam three strokes. Suarez floated on his back. I ducked under the water and squinted around for the fish, saw nothing but Carrine’s long, pale legs hovering feet above the muddy bottom.

Terrarium

Three times he'd seen HR about the broken showers. Three times. Jared stood on the other side of Bernard Schmeckle's desk because there was only one chair and Schmeckle was sitting in it. He'd gotten the hang of bending his knees slightly to keep them from locking, to keep the blood flowing. Something he'd learned shore fishing as a kid. He knew how to flex his toes inside his shoes one by one to work the muscles in his calves and upper thighs.

"The showers again?" Schmeckle asked. He traced a bronzed finger along the edge of his date book. "They're getting fixed on Tuesday."

Jared imagined hurtling over the desk and grabbing Schmeckle by his cheap, purple tie, putting Schmeckle's eye to the picture of Cindy and Phineas he kept in his wallet and asking him to think of them with cancer or brain tumors like he often did in the middle of the night when Diane's snoring kept him up.

"You said that last month," Jared said.

"Got held up," Schmeckle said.

"We go home smelling like coolant. What if we're all, everyone here, poisoning our families? It'd be your fault, you know that?"

Schmeckle sighed then sat straighter. "Look, have you been over to the plastics division? They've got the older suits and they're fine. No one's had a sick day in..."

He clicked his mouse a couple times. "No one in plastics has called in sick in two months. I can take you over there. Let you see."

"I used to work in plastics," Jared said.

"Oh. Well then you know."

*

On the drive home from DuPont Jared passed palm trees and missed his North Woods pines. He drove over canals—sad scratches in the earth compared to the glacial lakes he trolled for walleye. Everything he caught in the neighborhood waterways was covered in a milky slime. But this suburban swamp of a state was supposed to be good for Diane's hip. Diane's injury needed warm weather, the doctors said, and warm weather meant Florida.

Diane met him at the door.

"Cake's in the oven," she said. Strands of red hair hung loose from her bun.

"Great," he said. Jared stood a good three feet from his wife.

"The shower's aren't fixed?" she asked.

"No."

"I'll get the kids in the living room."

Diane walked off to find Phineas and Cindy, still favoring her right hip.

Upstairs, Jared lined the hamper with a Hefty bag. He wore gloves while he took off his clothes, and took the gloves off only after he was otherwise naked. Then he stepped into the shower and tried not to think of the chemicals he was washing off, the hot water opening his pores, methacrylic acid and phthalamide working deeper into his skin, down through the epidermis. It was time to get out.

His children, over the last several months, had started calling him "wet man." They thought he was never dry anymore because they only touched his damp skin, his damp hair, his softened fingernails. Jared found this very sad. He practiced more thorough drying. When his Diane's hairdryer wasn't strong enough, he bought his own and hid it under old sheets in the towel closet.

*

They ate macaroni and cheese, Cindy's favorite. Jared had a little, but mostly ate salad. He felt carrot shreds scrub his esophagus clean. He ate Cindy's share since she was the birthday girl and didn't have to eat any. Phineas blew bubbles in his milk until Diane brought the cake out.

"I think it's the best one I've made," Diane whispered to Jared as he lit the candles.

"It's because I'm seven," Cindy whispered back.

Eight candles glowed. Cindy tucked a few stray hairs behind her ear, bent over the candles the way her mother did, and blew them out.

"What did you wish for?" Phineas asked.

"Presents," Cindy said.

"You're not supposed to say, honey." Diane smiled.

But there were presents.

"Here," Phineas said. He handed his older sister a teddy bear. "Happy Birthday, Sister!" scrawled across a plush heart. She set it aside for Jared's gift. He'd wrapped the box in old funnies. Cindy stood over the package and tore it open.

"What is it?" she asked.

"It's a terrarium," Jared said. "Like a fish tank, but you put frogs in it, or lizards."

It was a starter kit. He'd loved terrariums as a kid.

"Russell Boyd brought a frog to class yesterday for show and tell," Cindy said. "It was gross. He made it dance."

She pushed the box aside for Diane's shiny, yellow present. They'd agreed on the princess costume, but then he saw the terrarium and bought it without thinking.

Cindy put the cheap plastic tiara on her head and Diane velcroed her into the dress. Phineas picked up the teddy bear he'd given his sister and turned it over in his hands, somewhat sadly, Jared thought. He pulled Phineas to him. His son didn't resist, instead laid his head on Jared's shoulder and watched Cindy twirl around the living room.

Cindy stopped spinning. Her face drew into itself, greened.

Jared hated the sound of throwing up. He felt his own dinner climbing up out of his stomach. He closed his eyes and breathed.

"Gross," Phineas said. His voice vibrated against Jared's neck. Jared thought he saw cake in Cindy's vomit, and bits of macaroni. He wondered if she'd snuck into his work clothes hamper, lifted the lid, peeked in. Reached out a finger. Just one.

But they kept an old barbell on top she couldn't lift.

"Oh, honey," Diane muttered. She came back from the kitchen with a handful of dishtowels and threw them over the vomit.

"Those are the good dishtowels," Jared said.

Cindy began to cry and Diane toed the towels to cover a few stray macaroni noodles before brushing back her daughter's hair, tracing her thumbs around the edges of Cindy's eyes. Jared thought of his wife's skin, soft because of the rough washcloth she used every night. Her face, always red when she crawled under the covers, in the morning was new.

Putting Phineas to bed was easy. It always was. He fell asleep halfway through *The Velveteen Rabbit*. Phineas never slept with him and Diane. It was always Cindy crawling in

between them, over them, on top of them. Those mornings Jared woke with a stiff neck and Diane with dead arm.

He went downstairs. The sour smell of vomit hit him hard. He gagged and pulled his shirt over his nose. Diane picked up the towels.

"Here." Jared reached for the box of baking soda.

Diane held onto it. "I'll do it," she said.

A fine, white dust fell over the carpet. Like sifted flour or playground sand. Diane set the box on the end table. She put a hand on her forehead and balanced on one leg like a flamingo, a hip stretch she did when her hip flexor started to bother her, which seemed to be more and more often lately. She used to dance around the house, all arched back and long limbs, before she popped her hip.

"I thought we agreed on the costume. She wanted the costume," Diane said.

Jared shrugged. "I thought she should have options," he said. "Frogs and dresses."

"Frogs and dresses? You were a one-gift guy, remember?"

"I got a raise. The whole coolants staff did."

Diane looked hurt. "I'm not worried about money."

"Sorry." Jared looked at the terrarium box. A pixilated chameleon lazed on a heating rock. "Want to set it up?"

Diane shook her head. "Cindy's waiting for a story." She kissed him on the cheek and walked upstairs, jumping the creaky step near the top. She disappeared around the corner.

Jared stepped over the baking soda and opened the box. A ten-gallon tank and a small bag of gravel. Some starter kit. He removed the tank from its box and plastic, and set it on the coffee table. Through it, he could see the kitchen. The glass blurred things so that

the refrigerator was a smudge in the corner. Jared knelt and stuck his head in the tank and listened to his breathing echo. The tank smelled like acrylate.

During lunch break the next day, Jared went straight to the men's locker room and cranked the shower knob to the right. The pipes creaked and popped, but no water. Of course. Why would Schmeckle actually call the damn plumbers?

Jared leaned against his locker. He could leave. He knew this. He knew it would be easy to hang up his safety suit and leave it hooked to the wall like an empty fish skin. He could walk through the locker room without cleaning number 301 out. He could stride past Marve at the security desk, tip his first three fingers hello-goodbye as he always did and never come back.

But he couldn't *really* do that. He knew it, Diane knew it, and some day even Cindy and Phineas would know it. *Do what you love*, he would tell them. *Do what you love and you'll find some way to make money doing it*. He would say this to them some day, maybe when they entered middle school, those square-peg-to-round-hole years, or maybe when they began high school. He'd heard that high schools made students pick a major now, that at fourteen they were supposed to know where they wanted to end up at twenty-three. (Hell, at fourteen his dream job was running a walleye charter boat on Lake Superior.)

At some point he would say to them, *Do what you love*, and they would know that he was a hypocrite. They would find out that he'd given up trying for his charter service because he would tell them. To warn them. But he knew they would judge him harshly for this because they wouldn't understand that he'd once been like them.

His coffee, the next morning, was burned and it burned his tongue. His toast tasted metallic. He saw Cindy and Phineas off to school and kissed Diane extra long before she left. She wore a different shade of lipstick that tasted chemically the same. Then, Jared got in his car and drove in the direction of the DuPont plant. He imagined driving a terrarium, water sloshing around his feet, a nice heating rock beneath him. He was driving to the plant, driving past the ABC Liquors and the palm trees and the water main repairs on Hyacinth. He was doing this and then he was driving to the pet shop and parking and standing in front of rows and rows of heating rocks. He picked one: Exo Terra Heating Rock. \$30. The gravel several steps to the left claimed to need less cleaning than the stuff that came with Cindy's terrarium. He picked up plastic plants and put them back.

It was a particular tree frog that stuck out to him. Its light green bordered on brown and sometimes he lost sight of it against the tree bark propped in the display. The frog looked soft, like good leather. *Pinewoods Treefrog*, the sign said. Jared had read somewhere that frogs were the best sort of indicator species because they absorbed things through their skin, that native frog populations were declining—no, *plummeting*—worldwide.

"It's not going to sprout wings if you keep staring at it." A woman in a wheelchair stared up at Jared. Her nametag read *Bea*. "You have to take it home for that sort of thing," Bea added. She took it out of the display.

"Go on, touch it," she said.

Jared hesitated. He reached out.

"Wait," Bea said. She brought the frog closer to her chest. "Your hands are clean, right? You could kill him if they're not. I might get fired."

"Yeah," Jared said, but he followed her eyes to a vat of hand sanitizer, squirted some in his palm and rubbed. He ran a finger down the frog's smooth back. Bea placed it in a plastic container with holes punched in the lid and traded it to him for \$14.99.

It was dark by the time Jared came in through the laundry room. He hid the bag behind a stack of old newspapers and put the frog on a shelf behind the unopened pickles. Diane didn't even try to kiss him when he walked into the kitchen. He wondered if maybe she'd become too used to not touching him. He went upstairs. He undressed, checked that his paunch, the slight sag in his belly, wasn't any more or any less. Through the shower glass he saw Diane remove the hefty bag from the hamper and put a new one in. She'd bring the clothes to a laundromat in the next couple of days and read *Dance Magazine* while the cycle ran its course. He hoped she wouldn't ask about work. Lying to her would triple the guilt he felt about skipping half a day of work. Partway through drying, he heard Diane shriek and nearly tripped over Phineas's racecar set on his way downstairs.

"What?" he asked. "What's wrong?"

Diane pointed. A small roach crawled along the kitchen ceiling.

"I'll take care of it," he said.

Diane looked as relieved as he felt. He'd been sure she found the frog. She had a thing about outside creatures being inside. Diane left the kitchen, calling for Cindy and Phineas to wash their hands for dinner, or no dessert.

It took Jared three swats with an old Jade Garden take-out menu before he got the bug. He swept it carefully onto the paper and brought it into the laundry room. The frog stared at him from inside the Tupperware.

"Bon appétit," he said and slid the roach inside. The frog croaked once then fell silent.

Diane slept like the dead because she used a sound machine. Something about looped artificial crickets helped her. The noise kept Jared awake, so they had a deal: she would go to sleep before him and when he came to bed, he'd turn it off. For this reason, he knew she'd think nothing of him staying downstairs after dinner and story time.

He didn't turn the lights on in the laundry room, instead found his way back to the newspapers and pickles in the dark. The frog blinked at him and croaked. Jared laid layers of dirt and gravel and Spanish moss in Cindy's terrarium. He added water and the heating rock and a small slab of bark. The frog seemed at home in it all. At least, it didn't move much even when he touched it. He took this as a good sign.

*

The second frog came from a drainage ditch. Jared looked it up in an old field guide. *Florida Cricket Frog*, it said. It was tan and had two dark stripes on its rear. That was the one Diane found first. He hadn't put the frog in the terrarium yet, so when she found it she must have been looking through the hurricane section of the pantry. *Surprise, surprise*, Jared thought when he heard her shriek. *Lucy*, he imagined her saying, *you've got some 'splainin' to do*. She didn't joke like that anymore. Not since Phineas was born. She came in holding the jar in front of her like she held his dirty laundry.

"It's for the terrarium," Jared told her. He took the jar and set it on the counter next to the salad.

"Does that look like food to you?" she asked.

Jared picked the jar up. The frog sat at an angle so he could see its small toes against the glass.

"I thought you threw the terrarium out," Diane said.

Jared shook his head. "No. It's in the laundry room under the folding table. Behind all those old newspapers."

Diane turned on her heel and walked back into the laundry room. She returned a moment later. "There's another one in there," she said.

"A tree frog," said Jared.

"Boil the pasta," she said. Then she started matchsticking carrots so Cindy would eat them.

Jared put the frog back on the counter and watched the water hesitate to boil. Phineas came down and took the frog to the table. He turned the jar in his hands, put his fingertip to the frog's foot. Jared studied his son's face distorted through the curved glass and marveled at the way his features spread and the colors all ran into each other.

"Cool frog, Dad," said Phineas. "What's his name?"

"Why don't you take it upstairs and you and Cindy can name it?" Diane said.

Phineas slid off his stool and sighed an old-soul sigh that always made Jared's breath catch in his chest, as if the air his son pushed away came from Jared's lungs. As if it was old air.

"Fine. But I don't want carrots, okay?" And then he was gone and the frog was gone with him and Jared was left with Diane. She flexed her hip and he bent his knees just a little.

He watched her shoulder blades poke at the fabric of her shirt in time with the sharp snap of blade on cutting board. She paused and Jared imagined she felt his eyes tracing her

spine vertebrae by vertebrae, pushing at them, helping her to stand straighter, the way he used help her stretch when she still danced. They'd sit on the floor, feet to feet, and he'd pull her hands toward their toes, stretching her hamstrings then opening her hips.

"Jared?" Diane said.

"Is your hip bothering you?" he asked.

"What?"

"I asked if your hip was bothering you."

"No, it's fine. The water's boiling."

*

Phineas brought the third one home with him from school. Jared walked in through the laundry room. He paused at the terrarium. Diane had consented to giving it a shelf of its own, up high and off to the side. It couldn't be behind her, she said, because then she felt their little eyes watching her. But it couldn't be in front of her, either, because then she'd have to look at them.

He reached in a hand and found the tree frog, picked it off the slab of bark it clung to. Its smooth belly was cool against his skin. Was it bigger now? He put it back. Only a little at a time. A little at a time and then he'd see if things changed, if his touch somehow hurt them.

Diane and Phineas met him at the edge of the rug outside the laundry room.

"I told him he could keep it, but it's the last one, Jared, okay?" Diane said. "That tree frog's getting big enough."

"Maybe it's just growing."

She brushed her bangs out of her eyes.

"Yeah. I don't know. Probably. It's a little fatter or something. Just no more frogs, okay?"

Her fingernails were shorter, Jared noticed.

"Sure," he said.

Phineas bounced from foot to foot, grinning, a purple smudge of something smeared over his top lip. Cindy peered over the back of the couch, holding a Barbie doll by its hair. It swung naked from her hand. He remembered teaching them about the edge of the rug. How they couldn't come past it until he'd showered. Until he was clean.

"Mrs. Abernathe says it's a greenhouse frog," Phineas said. "She said to leave it alone, but Jason Thomas Henry helped me catch it."

Jared was constantly amazed by his children's propensity for remembering names.

"Let me clean up and then we'll take care of him, okay?"

He went upstairs and into the bathroom. He placed his hands on his shirt then held them up to the light. They looked like normal hands. Not too large or too small, a few freckles but nothing troubling. They glowed faintly orange against the light, a see-through skin-glow.

"Dad!" Phineas pounded at the door. "Are you done yet? He doesn't want to be in the jar anymore!"

"Five minutes, buddy. Wait for me downstairs, okay?"

On the other side of the door Phineas heaved a sigh. "Fine. But don't take as long as you usually do."

Jared didn't hear him leave, but he felt it all the same.

Phineas was waiting for him at the foot of the stairs.

"Let's put it in with the others," Jared said. He reached for the small pickle jar, but Phineas pulled it close to his chest.

"No. I want to do it," he said. "I found him."

Jared nodded. "Okay. Okay, that's fine. "

The terrarium's heat lamp glowed in the far corner of the laundry room. Jared set two milk crates in front of its shelf. Phineas's nose barely came above the shelf itself, so Jared added a phone book.

"Cool," Phineas whispered.

The tree frog clung to the glass. Blotches marred its smooth, white belly. Jared reached in a hand and touched the frog. Its eyes blinked closed for a moment and the frog shifted. Pressed up against the glass, the blotches came together to form a smiley face, clear as ink. Jared withdrew his hand.

"Is it sick?" Phineas asked. "Can I touch it?"

"No," Jared said. He took a breath, looked away toward a pile of cleaning rags ready for the wash. When he looked back, the face was gone.

"Let's put the new guy in, huh?" He reached for the jar.

"No!" Phineas scrambled for the jar, knocking over a can of WD40 in the process. It hit the concrete sharply, metallically, and Jared waited for the hiss that meant a leak.

Nothing.

Jared let out a breath. The frog was probably fine, not contaminated. Phineas found it at school. Nowhere near DuPont. Jared himself hadn't touched it. He could use it as a constant. Compare the others to it.

"Go ahead, Phin. Let's get him in, okay?"

Phineas pulled the frog out. Scarlet eyes stood out against bronze skin. It kicked its legs, almost slipping Phineas's hold.

Jared reached for it and Phineas pulled back. "No," he said. He stood on tiptoe and plopped the frog in with the other two. It hopped once then settled into a moss bed.

"Don't touch him, okay?" Phineas said.

His eyes were sharp, focused, the way they were before he turned sullen.

"Okay," Jared said. He held his hands up. "Okay."

"Swear," Phineas said.

Jared held out his pinky.

"No, *real* swear," Phineas said. Jared wondered where his son had learned suspicion. It was unnerving.

"Okay, Phin, I *real* swear."

Phineas nodded and made Jared leave the laundry room before him.

*

At work, to distract himself from breathing in nylon resin, Jared thought about Cindy and how much she took after her mother. In his experience the older child often looked more like the father, but Cindy had Diane's bone structure and every one of her expressions. She pursed her lips the same way Diane did when Jared kept her waiting for the shower or the microwave. She smiled the way Diane did when he used to bring her band-aids after a performance instead of flowers, and she danced the same way, too—spinning out into larger and larger circles.

Phineas, though. Phineas didn't look much like either of them. Or maybe he looked so much like both of them that they couldn't see one or the other. He had a hint of Diane's jaw line. Sometimes, when he looked close, Jared thought he saw a bit of his own ears on his son—the way his earlobes curved to the side of his head. Attached earlobes, they were called.

All of this to remind himself why he stayed at DuPont, and also why he shouldn't.

"Jared. Hey. Earth to J-Man."

Jared looked up from the resin. Jarrod grinned at him out of his safety suit.

"Hey. So we're going to grab a beer after work. You should come."

Jared shook his head. "I don't think so. But thanks."

"Aw, come on, J-Man. What's keeping you from a couple of brewskies with the boys, huh? Is it the old lady? She on your case about...what was it about last time? Roaches or something?"

"Yeah," Jared said. It was easier to lie. "Yeah, it's pretty bad now. She's worried there might be an infestation or something. She's crazy sometimes."

Whenever he talked like this, talked like Diane was some other person, he felt like some other person, too, which made it easier to work with Jarrod. Working with someone with the same name made him feel like a duplicate, the odd offspring of a production line.

"That's too bad, man. Too damn bad." Jarrod shook his head. The suit's fabric crinkled around the neck. Jarrod's face twisted into a solo-cup grin.

"You should take some nitrocellulose. Sneak it out from the lacquer vats, fix your infestation problem."

Jarrold moved a little closer. "You know," he said. "Bshhhhh!" He spread his hands in an explosion. Jarrold probably thought the gesture was actually sign language for *explosion*. Probably it was.

"Yeah," Jared said. "Maybe just a little for in the walls."

He turned back to the resin, which would soon be stockings or car parts or rollerblades.

*

Jared found the southern leopard frog at the swampy edge of the retention pond behind the factory. He went out there during lunch on nice days, days that allowed him to pretend he was back home in the North Woods. They'd been here six years—Phineas had been born here—and Florida still didn't feel like home.

The leopard frog blinked out of the water at him. Jared wondered if it had extra legs or an exaggerated tadpole body beneath the surface. He hesitated then slid his hand into the water, reminding himself to wash that hand extra in the shower. The frog kicked once then lay still, breathing in his hand. Jared counted the legs twice: four both times. He put the frog in his lunch bag. It settled itself in the far corner and didn't move.

He came in through the laundry room, placed his lunch bag on top of the washer. Behind the door he could hear Cindy singing, "I'm a little teapot" and Phineas yelling at her to stop. The door sagged in its frame a little, and the groan from the other side meant Diane had her hands full. He leaned against the door and listened to her breathe, wondered if she could feel his weight against her own.

"Chicken fingers," he heard her say over Cindy's singing. "We're having chicken fingers. Now do you want peas or corn, guys?"

Then the microwave whirled farther away and Jared wandered back to his bag. The frog was a dark spot against the plastic lining. He lifted it out, relishing its skin against his skin. He knew his hands could do no worse to this one than the water, so he let his fingers linger longer before placing it in with the others.

Jared searched the tank. The tree frog definitely seemed bigger. He lifted it out. It felt only slightly heavier. Maybe. He checked its belly. No strange marks. He didn't touch the greenhouse frog. There was an extra one, a northern spring peeper, and he thought that Phineas must have brought that one home, too. Or maybe Cindy. Five frogs total.

Jared rustled under the stack of old newspapers and found the box he'd been keeping roaches in. It was tightly sealed and took some effort to open. If Diane found out he was keeping roaches she'd probably kill him, or worse, divorce him. He opened a corner and poured a few into the terrarium. They hung onto the box edge with thin legs before toppling into their last moments.

"Daddy," Cindy said at dinner. "Phinny was playing with your frogs."

"They're not his," Phineas said. "Two of them are mine." He turned to Jared. "Right, Dad? Two of them are mine because I brought them home?"

Jared nodded. "Right, Phin. Two of them are yours. Just make sure not to touch the other ones." The tree frog *was* bigger, he decided.

"Why can't I touch the other ones?" Phineas's fork sprouted from his fist.

Jared dipped a chicken finger in ketchup. "Because they aren't yours."

Phineas pinched his lips together and sat more firmly in his chair.

"Jared," Diane said.

"What?"

"Come on. He's not going to eat."

She turned to Phineas. "Here, honey." She put another roll on his plate and he glared at her.

"I don't want a roll," he huffed. "I want to hold the green frog."

"Phineas," Jared said. "No. You can't."

"Yes, I can," he said.

Cindy threw her roll at Phineas. "Stop it, Phineas. You're being a brat."

"Cindy," Jared warned. "Apologize."

"No. He's being a brat. Right, Mom?"

Diane rubbed the bridge of her nose.

"Right?" Cindy asked.

Phineas stood on his chair. "I can too hold the green frog," he said.

"Phineas, sit down," Diane said.

"Mom!" Cindy shouted. "Right?"

"Cindy, please. Eat your corn," Diane said.

Cindy pushed her chair back and ran to the laundry room. "I'm going to get the green frog. You can't have it."

"No!" Phineas shouted. He jumped off his chair. "Cindy!"

Jared dropped his chicken finger and stood. His stomach felt small and his fingers swollen and prickly.

Diane gave Jared her Flat Eyes. Jared hated the Flat Eyes. Last time they meant, *Don't argue with me anymore, we're moving to Florida.*

"Diane," Jared said. He held his hands out in front of him. He wanted to say, "I'm sorry about the kids. I'm sorry about the frogs," but he wasn't, not really.

"I'll just clear this up," Diane said. She started stacking plates and Jared gestured to help, but she shook her head. "You get Cindy and Phineas," she said.

Jared bolted for the laundry room fearing the worst. The door snapped against the wall, startling both children. Cindy held the tree frog, both her hands wrapped around its middle.

"It's big," she declared.

Phineas pulled at one of its legs and the frog squirmed in Cindy's grip.

"Give it, Cindy," Phineas said.

Cindy pulled back. "Let go, Phineas."

Jared felt his stomach nibble its edges. "Cindy, give me the frog."

"No. It's my birthday present." She clutched the frog to her chest. "And Sarah Ritter says that if you kiss a frog it turns into a prince."

She bent her lips to the frog's head and Jared ran at her, intending to knock it out of her hands. Her eyes grew wide.

"Cindy. Drop it," he said.

She dropped it. The frog landed wetly and gave a fleshy croak.

"Don't touch it, Phineas," Jared said. He knelt in front of Cindy, examined her lips. They looked thin and pink. Were they pinker than normal? Were her lips just chapped?

Cindy took a small step back and part of Jared hated himself. Would protecting his children always mean scaring them, too?

"I didn't kiss it, Daddy," Cindy said. "I didn't kiss the frog. I promise."

Jared deflated. He hadn't realized his shoulders were almost at his ears.

"Okay, honey. It's okay. Let's just go wash up."

Cindy nodded.

"I'll meet you in the bathroom. Phineas go with her," Jared said.

"But I didn't touch it," he said.

"You were pulling its leg," Jared said. "Go."

They left and Jared crouched over the frog. It hadn't moved much and he wondered if maybe it was injured. Or dead. Jared picked it up. The tree frog was bigger than the bullfrog he'd kept as a kid. It was abnormal, but still alive.

An hour later, Diane stood in front of their bed with her arms crossed, a towel wrapped tightly around her torso. Her hair hung damp across her shoulders.

"What is *that* doing in here?" She nodded toward the terrarium, which now sat on their dresser.

"I don't want Phin and Cindy getting into it anymore," he said.

"They're just frogs," she said.

"They're not careful enough," he said.

"Why don't you just get rid of it then? I don't want it. Look how big the tree frog's getting. Is that even normal?"

Jared lay back on the bed and made constellations out of the ceiling popcorn.

"You picked the bed frame," he said.

"What?"

"You picked the bed frame. And you picked the dresser. And that creepy little flower girl picture. I can't stand that picture. Let me have this one, okay?"

Diane stood at the edge of the bed and stared down at him. Jared could smell the Ocean Breeze Suave she used.

"None of those things require feeding, Jared," she said.

He sat up and leaned forward, resting his head against her stomach. Her muscles shifted to absorb the weight. Years of washing had worn the towel thin and Jared felt the curve of her stomach against his cheek.

"Hey, Diane?"

"Yeah."

"Does that one look like it's glowing a little?"

Diane turned. "Don't be ridiculous." She walked toward the bathroom. "Put it back in the laundry room or something."

Jared walked to the terrarium and crouched until the greenhouse frog was at eye-level. It glowed faintly, hardly noticeable.

"They might help you sleep better at night, hon. You know, with the croaking? It'd be like home. You slept better back home."

The faucet turned off in the bathroom.

"A lot of things were better back home."

Jared stared harder at the greenhouse frog. And was the tree frog fatter than the last time he'd looked? Diane appeared next to him. She must have read panic on his face.

"It's really that important to you?"

"Yeah," he said. "It's that important to me."

She stood in fourth position as if about to dance away from him.

"Fine, we'll try it, but if they keep me up they're gone. Deal?"

"Deal," Jared said.

*

With the frogs croaking in the bedroom at night, Diane stopped using her sound machine. She closed her eyes and felt her way to bed, still unable to bring herself to look at the terrarium. "Something's wrong with that green one. It shouldn't take up a quarter of the tank, Jared," she'd murmur before sleep. Or, "Can you turn down the tank light? I can see it through my eyelids." But he couldn't and Diane knew it. She slept closer to him. The mornings were more pleasant. They rose early and drank coffee together. For every hour Jared lay awake listening to the frogs croak (he thought he heard one speak), Diane seemed to sleep for three.

Jared always came in through the laundry room now. When he brought the Little Grass Frog home, he passed through the laundry room quickly, pausing only to check that the roach box was still sealed, and continued up the stairs. Phineas and Cindy hovered at the edge of the rug.

"What's that, Dad?" Phineas asked, pointing at the jar in Jared's hand. "Is that a new one?"

Diane, at the kitchen table, didn't even look up from her book. "It better not be."

Jared smiled and put a finger to his lips and nodded at Phineas, then trekked up the stairs. Phineas knew not to follow until Jared was showered, but he still felt bad leaving his son at the foot of the stairs.

Cindy was in the bedroom. She'd dragged the computer chair from the office to the dresser and stood staring down into the terrarium. She spun the chair slightly from side to side.

"That one's glowing, Dad," she said. Her finger hovered just above the greenhouse frog.

Jared set the grass frog down on the nightstand.

"Don't touch it," he said.

Cindy gripped the edge of the terrarium and peered deeper. Her toes barely touched the seat and Jared had the preposterous thought that the tank might swallow her whole.

"The fat one looks hungry," said Cindy. Her voice was dulled by the glass.

"Cindy," Jared said. "Go sit on the bed for a minute."

He wanted to scoop her up and sit her there himself, but kept his hands pocketed and waited for his daughter to step down off the chair. He hadn't washed DuPont off his hands yet. He knelt in front of her.

"You know you're not supposed to be up here," he said.

She kicked the box spring with her heels. "I know."

"Did you touch any of them?" Jared asked.

Cindy shook her head. "I only looked. Am I going to lose dessert?"

Jared sighed. "No. Wash your hands and go downstairs."

He closed the door behind Cindy then slipped his hands inside the terrarium. The familiar thrill-pit of nerves huddled in his stomach. The greenhouse frog was warm in his hands, glowing a dull orange. Burning from the inside, he imagined. Jared drew the curtains and, in the dark, watched the frog's body pulse with light. Schmeckle would explain it away as an anomaly, some miraculous freak of nature. He would accuse Jared of dipping the frog in cracked Glo-Sticks. Jared placed the frog back among the twigs and leaves. The tree frog took up almost a third of the tank now and stared hungrily at everything.

By the terrarium's light, Jared unscrewed the grass frog's lid and tapped the jar at the edge of his palm. Tiny earthquakes to encourage movement. The frog stuck-slipped-slid its way toward the mouth of the jar. Jared plucked it from the lip, felt its small weight in his hand. He examined each thin leg, counted its toes. If he held his breath, quieted his own pulse, he could feel the frog's heart against his fingers. SpongeBob's nasal enthusiasm drifted up through the carpet.

"I'm ready, I'm ready, I'm ready," Jared mimicked, running a forefinger over the frog's skin. It blinked up at him, or he thought it did. He put the grass frog in the tank and pulled on gloves. He stripped to the skin, losing layer after layer, unnerved by the amphibian eyes, but liberated by them also.

*

The first frog to disappear was the Florida cricket frog. In truth, the frog was so inconspicuous compared to the others that he'd almost forgotten about it.

"There are only five frogs in the tank," Diane said at breakfast. "Weren't there six before? I think the giant ate one."

There were six before. Now there were five. He peered into the tank. At this point, the tree frog, the first frog from the pet shop, was more than triple its initial size. It was now roughly the size of a small dog, a chubby Chihuahua maybe. He took it out, held it to his face. The frog seemed healthy if otherwise huge. He put it back. It wasn't swollen exactly, just bigger.

Phineas came in trailing the computer chair and stood next to him. He grabbed for the edge of the tank.

"You touched my frogs!" he said. His face twisted into the shape his mother's often did.

"Phineas," Jared said. "Be careful. You're going to fall."

Phineas looked him in the eye and rotated back and forth on the chair.

"No I'm not. You said you wouldn't touch my frogs. You said they were mine."

Jared put his hands on Phineas's shoulders. Phineas shrugged them off.

"I'm sorry," Jared said. "I had to check them."

"For what?" Phineas asked.

Jared scrambled for a thought.

"Magic," said Jared. "I had to check them for magic, but I couldn't tell you."

The relief-guilt he felt whenever he lied to his child washed through him.

"Magic?" Phineas asked.

"Look." He stood behind Phineas, wrapped his arms around him, and pointed.

"You don't believe me? Your greenhouse frog's glowing isn't it?"

Phineas nodded. "Yeah," he said. "Weird."

"And," Jared continued, pointing at the tree frog. "Have you ever seen a frog that fat before?"

Phineas laughed. "Fat magic," he said.

Jared smiled. "See the little one there? The peeper?"

Phineas nodded.

"That one talks sometimes," Jared said.

"Yeah, right," said Phineas. "Why's it so quiet?"

"Maybe it only talks at night." In truth this scared Jared. Its small words looped through his ear canals the entire night before. "Peat," it said. "Ring. Oak." Diane never woke.

"Dad," Phineas said. "Dad, look at the spotted one."

Jared found the leopard frog with his eyes. Its spots blinked at him. He pulled his hands out of the terrarium.

"What's it doing?" Phineas asked. The frog wedged itself in the corner closest to him.

"I think it's looking at us." Jared bent closer. Each of the frog's spots rolled to follow his finger across the glass. He reached in and picked the frog up. The spot-eyes were bumpy and cold against his skin. Jared wanted to drop it, but didn't want to scare his son. Up close the eyes shone like wet bronze.

"I want to see," Phineas said. He pulled at Jared's hand and grinned at the frog.

"Hey, Phin? Let's have this be our secret, okay?"

"The magic frogs have to stay secret?"

"Yes. If too many people see them, they lose their powers."

Phineas nodded solemnly. "Okay."

Jared put the leopard frog back.

*

At work, Jared worried about the rest of the frogs. He thought about the fact that the grass frog turned grey, then black, whenever he held it. It faded back to brown as soon as he put it down. Jared thought about Diane poking him awake the night before and pointing to the terrarium. "One of the frogs is glowing," she'd said. "It's sort of pretty." She fell back asleep and Jared was left awake in the low orange glow to wonder about the chemical nature of things. In the dark the peeper croaked "Light" "Coal" "Ink."

He felt the leopard frog squirm in his shirt pocket beneath his coveralls.

All this while he punched chemical mixes into the computer, ordering up another batch of nylon, another vat of *innovative plastic*. All this while dodging Jarrod's high-fives and listening for the phone on the far wall, for an incoming call, an emergency, Phineas with a rash around his eye, Cindy with no voice.

Jared backtracked through each screen and touched each *OFF* button he was cleared to. He remembered when *OFF* buttons were actually buttons. The machines clicked and screeched, making the large metallic noises they always did before finally humming into silence.

"Yo, man, what'd you do?" Jarrod was at his shoulder. Jared pretended not to hear him even when he peered at his face, plastic mask to plastic mask.

"You have to turn it back on," Jarrod said. The solemnity of his voice caught Jared's attention. "You're going to get me fired. I can't get fired."

Jared looked him in the eye. "Yes, you can."

He was going to see Schmeckle again. He'd decided that morning that he would maybe go see Schmeckle, and now he was definitely going to see Schmeckle. Schmeckle's door was locked. The paper clock on the door said he was at lunch. Jared knew Schmeckle ate at the Osceola Tea Room on Grand, so that's where he went.

"Checking out early today?" the guard asked. Jared squinted to make out the name on his badge then wondered if he'd always had to squint to make out name badges. *Trent* it said.

"Taking my lunch outside," Jared said.

"Ah," said Trent. "Hope you got your sunscreen handy."

Jared drummed his fingers on the front desk once and left. Nerves hit him as soon as he got in the car, and he couldn't tell if it was because of the heat that he was sweating. He felt swoony. He pulled the leopard frog out of his pocket and splashed it with warm water from a half-filled bottle. Every eye on the frog's body blinked against the liquid and Jared, suddenly afraid, wiped away much of the water. What would plastic particles do, he wondered. Blind it? Paralyze it? He imagined it shivering in his hands, convulsing, dying. Jared started the car. The frog blinked at him.

Schmeckle always sat at the back in the eight-person corner booth. Once, taking pity on him, the secretary had told him this. He'd never used the information, not until now. Thick, pink drapes turned the sunlight a muted salmon—the color of Cindy's princess dress. The thought propelled him onward. Jared found Schmeckle halfway through a tuna melt, waving a fry at a couple of men in pressed suits. He felt the leopard frog's toes press against his chest. He thought he could feel its heart flutter. Jared slid into the booth beside the man with the red tie. He would be polite, he decided, but insistent.

"Mr. Schmeckle," he said. "I'm very sorry to bother you here (he wasn't), but I couldn't wait until after lunch to speak with you (he couldn't)."

Schmeckle bit into a fry. "You know you're fired, right? I got a phone call about you switching off the equipment. You know how long it takes to boot those things back up? We're going to be behind on orders by at least three days now. And it's all coming out of your salary. In fact," he said, and here he waved a fry. "No severance pay. Bye- bye now."

Schmeckle's friends laughed. The one in the blue tie had a gold filling in his bottom right molar. Jared's breath hitched in his chest and he thought about losing the house, losing his wife, losing the kids. He thought about Cindy with her chapped lips and Phineas with a growth behind one of his knees. The frog twitched in his pocket. Jared placed a hand over it.

"What's that? Better not be some recording device," Schmeckle said. He leaned across the table, careful to keep his tie out of the ketchup. "Because I'll get lawyers on your ass so fast—"

Jared pulled the frog out and set it on the table.

"It's a DuPont product," Jared said.

Schmeckle squinted in the dim light. Each of the frog's eyes glistened. A shudder went through its body.

"What the hell? It's a frog." Schmeckle glared at him.

"Look at it," Jared said, and nudged it forward. It gave a weak hop toward the edge of Schmeckle's plate.

"Look at what?" He glanced down. "Are those eyes?" Schmeckle pulled his hands off the table. He looked at his buddies. "You're both witnesses to harassment."

Jared placed the frog in the middle of Schmeckle's plate.

"I opted for this. To support my family."

Shmeckle looked at him, his face twisted with disgust. "What the hell did you do to it?"

The frog's foot smeared ketchup. Its eyes swiveled and blinked.

Shmeckle leaned closer to Jared's face. "I asked what you did to the frog. Were you screwing with company products? Because I'll sue you, I swear I will."

Jared thought how very small Shmeckle would be without his purple tie and dress shirt. He wondered what he would look like in gym clothes, in a t-shirt and jeans, in boxers before bed. Probably he had skinny legs.

"I quit."

Jared left the frog staring up at Schmeckle.

*

When Jared woke the next morning, Diane was propped up in bed staring at the dresser.

"I think something's wrong with your frog," she said.

He rolled over and looked up. Green filled the entire terrarium. Bits of gravel and bark were pressed against the glass with trapped globs of water. He sat up quickly and went to the tank. Two small eyes peered at him from the top of the mass. A leg—purple—hung out of a very large mouth. Jared put his ear to the glass. From somewhere he heard a muffled, "Reed." Jared sat on the edge of the bed and ran his hands through his hair over and over again. Diane came up behind him and put her arms around his chest.

"It ate the last one right before you woke up," she said. "It took you so long to fall asleep, I didn't want to bother you."

She rested her chin on his shoulder. "I'm sorry."

Jared stared at the freckle halfway up her forearm, brushed his finger over it.

He leaned his head against hers, then stood. He'd make pancakes this morning, he thought. They never had pancakes anymore. Cindy and Phineas would like that. Then he'd take the frog somewhere green and slide it from between panes of glass. He'd drown it or bury it or leave it where maybe someone else would see it.

Sawgrass and the Broken Heart

The idea of burial is not a new one to me. In high school my best friend's father committed suicide. They found him in the bottom of his airboat with a shotgun, his orange earplugs floating against a deep shade of red. The newspapers called the loss of Airboat Bill "a sawgrass tragedy". "Tragedy" is hardly the word, I think. But what word can encompass his wife sitting in his favorite corduroy chair for a week straight? What word can explain why his daughter refused to eat anything but palm hearts and bullfrogs until they buried him? "Tragedy" does not begin to describe love.

On nights when Lyza really missed her dad she'd show up at my window with a brown sack and a couple of poles and we'd go out frogging. We slipped on our headlamps and walked to the edge of town where the Everglades opened up. The water stretched out, wide and flat. A long row of airboats bumped against the floating dock, and as we walked toward Airboat Bill's proud pirate flag, water shifted beneath our feet. Lyza climbed up to the driver's seat and turned the key (which she'd stolen from her mother's dresser). I covered my ears against the roar and watched Lyza shift levers.

Her lips shaped air into words: "Push us off."

So I did.

Even in the dark I could see the rust-stain of scrubbed blood, faint against the metal.

Out on the water, navigating patches of sawgrass, gliding over grassy shallows, we sank into the airboat's buzz and watched for glinting eyes. We slowed down so we could stand and stab at the water. Each bullfrog wriggled on the tip of its pole. Death throes, I

guess. When the sack grew damp and warm at the bottom and our arms hurt, we stopped.

We floated for awhile. This is when Lyza talked.

"I miss him."

"Me, too."

And we'd both re-do our ponytails, tie stray strands tight to our heads.

"He liked this time of year, you know."

Airboat Bill died during winter when the water was calm and the alligators lay on the warm mucky bottom.

"He loved trying to find gators for the customers. Trying to get the timing right. He had the best sighting record of any captain."

She fell quiet for a minute then, sniffing, then revved the engine back up. We shot across the black water, our loosened hair whipping our faces pink. I snuck back in my window and thought of frog legs and baked beans—anything but coffins—till I fell asleep. In the morning I picked mosquitoes out of my hair.

I mention Bill's death because it's important to know that I understand physical burial. I saw his body. I saw his coffin lowered into the ground and covered with dirt. People die and it sucks. I get that. But burial isn't all about physicality. Burial can be something completely Other.

Take my mother for example. She buries her desire for cheesecake in the garden. She calls this desire "carrots" and "tomatoes" and "bell peppers". She calls it "salad". I call it bullshit. Eat the cheesecake, Mom.

Other examples of burial:

- 1) My cousin's ex-girlfriend claims not to miss her ex-boyfriend.
- 2) My high school geography teacher "read" the fronts of girls' shirts. And dropped pencils so they'd pick them up.
- 3) In Miami there is a man who claims he hates cats, but his house is full of strays.

Burial, people. Burial.

After Airboat Bill's death I started seeing the black spoonbill around. It seemed like a sign, but I don't believe in signs. I believe in abnormalities. I believe in grand coincidence. I believe in genetic anomalies, which is what the spoonbill surely was. But I biked past the post office, past Yahkchee Metalworks' steaming warehouse, and there it was. I felt sucker-punched. Like all my air was shot to the sky.

I never carried binoculars even though I meant to, so I tipped my two-speed over and slipped my shoes off and made my way toward the edge of the little rainwater pond barefoot and quiet. The spoonbill didn't move, just stared at me. Our dusk is a sepia sky spread from an orange core. The spoonbill stood like a silhouette and I crouched in the tall grass, crouched beneath the blade tips, watching. The bird was black from flattened bill to water-swallowed legs, and as night drew on, it was lost in shades of grey.

I didn't tell anyone about the spoonbill until Lyza told me she dreamed about one. No one likes to hear another person's dreams, but she told me hers anyway, and because I was a good friend and her father was gone, I let her go. Here's how she told it:

I'm walking along this canal, right? Like in this place I used to live? This apartment complex I lived in when I was in Fort Lauderdale as a kid. Okay? So on the other side of this guardrail I see this spoonbill. No, wait. I see two of them. Flying. But here's the weird thing. They're black. So they land at the edge of the canal and I get all excited and I want to tell Rodg, which is weird because I haven't thought about him in months. But before I could find him and show him, I woke up.

(blah, blah, blah...)

Point of clarification: Rodg is Rodger Nelson, Lyza's whitebread, turtle-trapping ex-boyfriend who, even in her dream, probably would've wanted to shoot the bird. So I'm not sure why her dream self got so excited to tell him about it.

"I saw one," I told her. "Out behind the post office."

Lyza stared at me over her mango smoothie.

I went back to the rainwater pond after that, but it had dried up so completely that it was as if it had never been there at all.

Let me address the question of school. The morning after the boat mechanic found Airboat Bill, Principal Newton announced his death to my homeroom. Lyza was absent when he did this, which was probably good. I remember Principal Newton as a thin man with even thinner hair. There were certain girls in the school who found him attractive. I was not one of them. Neither was Lyza. But he spoke to a crowd, always, like he was hot shit. He announced Lyza's father's death like a game show host, like we'd just been given the privilege of seeing what was behind door number one. In the game of donkey-or-car, he revealed one hell of a donkey.

By lunch the entire school throbbed with whispers.

A mantra:

What happened, what happened, what happened, what happened...

And later in the day, when word got out that he'd done it himself:

How'd he do it, how'd he do it, how'd he do it, how'd he do it...

I was pissed. I was pissed at the kids in my school for being so gossipy; I was pissed at Principal Newton for treating the news like a godsend; I was pissed that I'd found out about my best friend's father's death from our principal. Most of all, though, I was pissed at Airboat Bill. I thought him selfish and unkind, and these thoughts ate away at the pit of my stomach because he'd never before been unselfish or unkind. When Yahkchee flooded during hurricane season, he revved up his airboat and ferried people all over town, from rooftop to rooftop.

When Lyza came to my house that night, wide-eyed and shell-shocked, she told me about the scar the coroner found on his chest.

"They said it was old scar tissue," she said. "And when they opened up his chest, his heart was gone."

She said all this in a single breath and put a hand across her lips, as if horrified by the way her tongue had been able to form those words.

Lyza didn't go back to school and her mother didn't make her.

I couldn't stop thinking about the spoonbill. Its pitch-feathered body fluffed up in the back of my mind. I rode my bike home past the post office every day hoping to catch

another glimpse of the bird. My mother noticed my restlessness and handed me a plate of rhubarb bars.

“Put your pedaling to good use,” she said. “Go check in on Mama G. Make sure she’s doing all right.”

I dragged Lyza with me.

"She's creepy," said Lyza. "Didn't she eat a live bird once?"

"That was Ozzy," I said. "You're being ridiculous."

"He ate a bat," she said.

We biked to the edge of the swamp in careful silence while I balanced the plate between my handlebars.

Lyza and I sat on a fallen palm trunk and waited for Mama G. We gazed up at the rickety structure, her elevated ramshackle collection of wooden boards. Two windows the color of old beer bottles were nestled between sun-bleached slats. The roof, tar-papered and blue-tarped, sagged in several places. I remember my mother spending hours on the phone rallying neighbors to convince Mama G to move. I remember her failing and trying again and trying again until finally, in the middle of baking apricot scones one afternoon, she dropped her hands down in the flour and I watched my mother give up.

"She used to babysit you, you know," she said.

I studied the landscape I'd known as a small child. The yard was never a yard, was always a glorious tangled mess of tall grasses and bright, flowered vines. The sawgrass stopped just shy of the back end of the house. There would be tadpoles in the water pooled

under the porch from last week's big storm. The old railroad ties were gone, though, dislodged from their upright positions by some big wind, some tropical storm.

Lyza and I stared at the high-up porch of Mama G's stilted house and waited for the sign to come inside.

"This place is so creepy," Lyza said. She stripped a palm frond of three pieces and braided them together. "What the hell are we doing here anyway? Can we just leave already?"

Lyza had changed since Airboat Bill died. She'd cut her hair short and dyed it red. She'd become the only kid in our high school to obsess over statistics; she talked constantly about the likelihood of two people having the same fingerprints, the likelihood of a person testing positive for HIV and not actually having it.

("It's about revision," she said. "About updating your beliefs based on new information."

"Hey, remember when you used to read books with characters?" I said.)

All of this had changed, but she still hadn't revised her opinion of Mama G's house.

I stood as soon as I saw the snake skin in the window because that meant Mama G was making tea.

"She's ready," I said.

Lyza followed my lead and stood. The palm braid dangled from her left hand. She let it fall. "What do you mean she's ready? Are you psychic or something now?"

Lyza gets crabby when she's nervous. Our whole town knows this. When we were kids the adults used to call her "Lippy Lyza" behind her parents' backs.

"The snake skin's in the window," I said, and pointed.

Lyza stared at me. "And?"

"Just come on," I said.

Lyza balked at the foot of Mama G's porch steps.

"I can't go up those," she said.

I started up the rickety steps, careful to hold onto the railing and check for rotting wood. Lyza followed.

At the top, Yahkchee's roofs spread out before us. The post office, the grocery store, the bait and tackle shop—all made smaller by height. Only the metalworks warehouse still looked huge. It loomed storeys above the other buildings. A man rolled a vat inside.

"I bet Mama G can see the neon sign from here at night," Lyza said.

Mama G opened the door and my balled fist, meant to knock, punctured air.

"Sure can," Mama G said. "Ugly and glaring as South Beach, the stupid thing. Never should've let them build."

She disappeared inside, leaving behind a whiff of lemon and old newspaper.

"She hates South Beach?" Lyza mouthed. "Who hates South Beach?"

I shrugged and followed Mama G's receding back into the dark spaces of her house.

"Why does she have so many skeletons?" Lyza whispered.

The mobile of palm warblers and finches twisted slow in the breeze of an open window. The snail kite still hung in the corner where I'd lain beneath it as a kid, counting its bones from tibia to beak.

"You know how weird it is to find a dead bird," I said.

Lyza folded her arms across her chest. I stared at the ceiling-birds, watched as they turned and turned and turned.

"Do you girls want tea? Maritza?" Mama G called.

I followed my name to the kitchen and set the plate of rhubarb bars on the counter. Mama G nodded a thank you. A purple gallinule preened next to the stove. For all her skeletons, Mama G always had at least one live bird.

"Sit," said Mama G. "You'll have tea. Both of you."

She slid mugs in front of us. The tea smelled horrible, like damp socks and citrus.

"Drink it," said Mama G. "It's good for you."

Lyza peered into her cup. "What is it?"

Mama G didn't bother answering. Instead, she returned to the stove for a mug of her own. The purple gallinule bobbed between our feet on its wide-splayed toes, chicken-like and clownish in color. Its purple, red, and blue looked as though someone had colored the bird in with crayons. Mama G absently fed it bits of something from her hand. I was afraid to ask what. When the last bit had gone down the gallinule's gullet, she folded her hands on the table.

"Your father misses you," she said to Lyza.

My friend stiffened beside me.

"But that isn't what you're here about," said Mama G.

"No," said Lyza. "Maritza dragged me here."

Mama G gave me a wry smile. "Tell your mother thank you."

The kettle popped quietly on the stove, and outside, the sky dimmed into late afternoon.

"I saw a black bird," I said.

"There are many black birds," Mama G said. "They're not uncommon."

"It was a spoonbill," I said.

Mama G regarded me from below her wild crown of hair.

"I told her she was seeing things," said Lyza. "They don't exist."

Mama G hushed Lyza with a wave of her hand, then turned back to me. "Where?" she asked.

I spun the lukewarm mug between my hands.

"Out back of the post office," I said. "Where that little marsh is, before the sawgrass starts up."

Mama G refilled her teacup. The purple gallinule dodged around her ankles until she sat again. Lyza slumped back in her chair, arms crossed.

"Last time that spoonbill showed up, the railroad came to lay tracks," said Mama G. She reached beneath the table and absently scratched the gallinule's blue cap. The bird arched, catlike, toward her fingers. "It left as soon as they did."

"Are there pictures?" I asked.

"Nope," said Mama G. "Just the one up here." She brought a knobby finger to her temple.

Lyza flicked her gaze between the two of us. "My dad never mentioned a black spoonbill."

"He'd have taken the tourists to it," said Mama G.

Lyza scowled.

"But the bird is back?" asked Mama G.

I nodded.

"It's late," she said. "The metal workers have already been here three months."

When she stood her chair shot out behind her. "Goodbye," she said. "Goodbye, goodbye. Up, up, up." And she hurried us out of our chairs and out the door.

Sunset spilled across the porch slats.

Everyone eats animal crackers differently. My mother dips them in milk and sucks the softened cookie to a hard lump. Lyza starts at the back end, always eating the tail first. I start with the legs. I reduce the crackers to a torso before nipping off the animal's head.

The animals in the Barnum and Bailey's box are not like any Florida animal. No alligators or bullfrogs or stilt-legged herons. Definitely no spoonbills. But then, no cookie could do justice to the flattened curvature of a spoonbill's beak. Perfectly designed for feeding, the second a small fish or water bug brushes against it, the bill snaps shut.

A memory:

Lyza and I met in middle school on a field trip to the South Florida Science Museum. I had braces then and Lyza's hair was a short, curly mushroom. We stood at opposite ends of the steel railing. We knew each other only vaguely from the lunchroom and from joint P.E. classes. She was the one who sucked at volleyball, and I was the one who sucked at gator ball—a football-soccer hybrid I never could get the hang of.

Both of us refused to stop staring at the T-Rex skeleton. No adult could move us with words or threats. This left the frazzled parent chaperone to pace back and forth across the exhibit room, peering anxiously out the doorway into the hall.

I stared at the snout and inched along the railing. As a seventh grader, I was "too old to still like dinosaurs." But I couldn't tear myself away from the sharp teeth, the heft of the skull, the curvature of the ribs. Bone structure fascinated me. Each joint snugged into a

socket, the smallest as big as my fist. This close, the bones were porous. These bones *felt* older than Mama G's bird bones.

Lyza and I ran into next to each other under the central vertebra of the backbone. She dug in her jeans pocket for a tube of strawberry chapstick.

"They probably aren't even real bones."

"Why aren't you with the rest of the group then?" I asked.

"Who wants to look at rocks?" She walked back to the bench and sat. I followed.

"Let's go, girls," said the chaperone.

We ignored her. Across the sandstone floor the skeleton seemed warm under the dim, orange lights.

"I guess it's pretty cool," said Lyza.

The chaperone stood in front of us, hands on her hips, her hair flat on one side.

"Get. Up," she said. "The bus is leaving. Do you really want to get detention?"

"My dad'll kill me," Lyza said. She stood and I thought of my mother baking in the back of the grocery store, my father shuffling through tubs of mail at the post office. I followed Lyza out the door.

Airboat Bill was myth. Rumors went around that he wrestled alligators, and when we all realized that alligator wrestling wasn't uncommon in the Glades, rumors circulated that he manhandled the eighteen-foot pythons that were edging out the gators. Lyza wouldn't tell me whether or not this was true. Airboat Bill was a large man, bulky and stocky with muscle. I wonder what he would have thought of the black spoonbill. I wonder what he thought about

the metal workers, what drove him to be the first in line at their shop. I wonder why Airboat Bill chose to give up his heart.

A month after Airboat Bill's death, a reporter came to the park with a fancy camera and a digital recorder.

"Miami Herald," he said. Lyza and I stared at his dress pants and Tommy Bahama hat. "Can you point me to Yahkchee Metalworks?"

Lyza put down the history book she'd been using to quiz me. "What do you want to go there for?"

The reporter took off his hat, wiped his forehead, and put it back on his balding head.

"Got a story to write," he said. He squatted in the grass next to our blanket. "Can I ask you? What do you know about the metalworks place? When did it show up?"

I sat up straight, conscious of my terrible posture. Lyza and I exchanged a look. Both of us were thinking of Airboat Bill's scarred chest, his missing heart, his place at the front of the metalworks line. It had to be connected somehow. Maybe this man knew something.

"Three months ago," I told him. "But they were building before that. We just didn't know what it was."

The man nodded.

"Off the record?" Lyza asked.

"Sure," he said.

"I think they hurt my father."

At noon the next day a crowd gathered in front of the grocery store. The high sun made Lyza and I sweat as we watched the reporter approach the metalworks building. He walked straight through the crabgrass, up to the door, and inside, his straw hat swallowed up. Then the crowd thinned. Some people went inside the store. Some went home. Many of us stayed put, watching the building, listening to the odd drip-and-sizzle coming from inside, always followed by the sound of heavy rocks dropped in deep water.

"The hell," Lyza said. "I'm getting ice cream."

She cracked her knuckles and went inside the store. Cool A.C. huffed out the sliding door. She came back with two Drumsticks. We tore open the paper. We were sucking the chocolate from the bottom of the cone when Lyza's mother emerged from the crowd and made her way silently toward the concrete building. The reporter still hadn't come out. Lyza stopped eating. Her mother crossed herself before entering.

We stood stock still.

"Hey." A voice. A small man with curly hair pushed his way through the crowd.

"Hey," he said again, and someone shushed him.

He tried again: "Y'all seen a black spoonbill around here?"

I hunched my shoulders and watched for Lyza's mom to reappear, for the reporter to reappear.

"It's all over the news," the man said.

I turned toward him. He adjusted a plain blue baseball cap and a pair of binoculars. He lifted the binoculars to his eyes.

"People are coming from all over to look for it," he said. "Ornithologists. Bird watchers. Me, I'm just hoping to check off a Life Bird. Never seen a black spoonbill. What are you all looking at anyway? Is it over there?"

No one answered him. He lifted his binoculars to his eyes.

"My mother's in there," said Lyza.

"Who? That her? With the tall guy?" asked the bird man.

He pointed toward the back of the building and, sure enough, Lyza's mother stood with the reporter staring out at the Everglades.

Lyza ran and I ran with her, jumping fire ant piles and clumps of weeds.

"Mom?" said Lyza.

The smell of hot metal was overwhelming. I pulled my tank-top up over my nose.

Lyza's mom turned to us, crying but smiling. She held her hand over the left side of her chest. The reporter stared at us, the skin between his eyebrows scrunched.

"Mom, what happened?" asked Lyza.

"Oh, honey," she said. She cupped Lyza's face. Red seeped through her shirt where her hand had been.

Lyza backed away from her mother, stared at the red stain on her shirt. "Do you need a doctor?"

"Oh honey," said her mother. "Nevermind that. They took it away. It's gone now. I'm rid of it."

She smiled and hugged Lyza. When she pulled back, a thin red was left on Lyza's shirt. We walked back toward the crowd, the heat of the building at our backs.

I turned to the reporter. "What happened in there?"

He shook his head. “The lengths people go to,” he said. His face was pink from the heat. “If I wrote about it, too many people would come.”

One of my earliest memories is of Everglades Alligator Farm, South Florida's oldest. Mint chocolate chip ice cream dripped down my hands as I watched a man in a floppy hat string up several whole chickens. The kind my mother sometimes roasted herself. Mini Thanksgiving turkeys. I squeezed close to the railing while the man cranked the clothesline out over a pond green-brown with the ridged backs of alligators. I clutched the cone with sticky fingers and stared at the reptiles, studied the way their tails swished in the water, thick and powerful. I tugged at my dad's shorts. My mom kept her hands on my shoulders, probably afraid I'd lean over too far and slip through the rails.

The hatted man raised a megaphone.

“Are you ready?” he called. “How bout some action?”

The people around me cheered and clapped and whistled.

With a pulley, he lowered the clothesline of chickens closer to the surface of the water. The alligators churned. He pulled the meat back up, then lowered it again, teasing. The next time he lowered the chickens (sopping wet by now), the gators leapt at them, jumped half out of the water and tore them from the line.

Some people shoved closer to the railing and others backed away. I stayed put. The man garbled something indiscernible into the megaphone and repeated the process over and over until every chicken was gone. Gradually the water quieted.

Alligators started to surface more often around February, once the water got a little warmer. By then, the metal workers were doing plenty of business. I couldn't bring myself to go in after Lyza told me what her mother told her:

It's the process that hurts. The removal.

"They took out her heart," Lyza said. "They took it out and they dipped it in bronze."

She went quiet for a moment.

"I want to see it," she said.

When she showed up at my window one night with our bullfrogging bag, I knew I had to go.

We snuck down to the building and waited.

"They took my dad's, too," Lyza said. "They told my mom about it. She said they called it 'swamp medicine'. She said he wasn't happy. How could he not be happy?"

We heard things. Muffled voices. The fat bubbling of thick liquid. The clang of metal on concrete.

Lyza gripped the bag tighter.

A man stepped out the door lugging a huge sack behind him. He hefted the sack into the back of a pick-up. I had time for one glimpse inside at the steaming vats and men in black aprons before the door closed and Lyza hissed at me to come on.

"He's headed to the docks," she said.

We followed, listening to the contents of the sack roll around in the bed of the truck.

"What's in there, do you think?" I asked.

Lyza pedaled beside me. "Probably the hearts."

The man backed the pickup right to the edge of the floating dock, then got out and yanked the sack out of the bed.

"Fucking heavy," he said.

He dragged the bag to an airboat and heaved it in over the side. The boat tipped dangerously to the left before righting itself. The man climbed in the driver's seat and pulled at the levers. The boat roared to life and revved out of sight. We jogged to Airboat Bill's boat and gave chase. The man stopped in the middle of a stretch of sawgrass and swung his spotlight around on us.

"The fuck you doing?" he shouted.

He bowed his bald head around the spotlight's beam, taking a good look at us. I fumbled at the switch and, after wiping the sweat off my fingers, aimed our spotlight at him. He shielded his eyes with a forearm.

"What's in the sack?" Lyza asked.

He squinted at her. "You Airboat Bill's kid?"

"Yeah."

"Then you know what's in the sack, honey."

He opened up the bag and rummaged around. The water stood still between us. He lifted out a clump of grey metal.

"This one's nickel," he said. He tossed it in the water. It hit the surface like a stone.

"Lyza," I said. "Let's go."

In the spotlight, mosquitoes buzzed around her pale face, her shadowy, hollow cheeks. She stared at the man, stared at the place where the heart went down.

The man opened the mouth of the sack wider and dumped the whole thing overboard in a rush of noise. Bronze and pewter, steel and nickel glinted in our crossed spotlights. Our boats rocked.

"For safekeeping, okay?" he said. "It's safe. Look."

He lifted his shirt, and over the pale rise of the left side of his chest we saw a raw scar.

"Lyza," I said. But she ignored me.

"Is that what you told my father? That it was safe?" she asked. Her eyes narrowed.

"Well it killed him, you know."

"We don't force it on anyone," the man said.

He revved his engine and shot off across the water. A moment later we followed.

Lyza said nothing.

People do this all the time now, hide parts of themselves in the sawgrass and muck. Sometimes at night you can hear a thumping underneath the hiss of crickets.

I went to see Mama G after that night. Lyza stayed home while we reassembled the bones of a blue heron. Sunlight warmed the living room rug.

"Hand me the humerus, Maritza," Mama G said.

I passed her the thin wing bone and she nestled it into the appropriate socket with a dab of glue.

"You're here with a question," she said.

"Why did he do it? Air Boat Bill," I asked. "And Lyza's mom."

Mama G sighed and straightened the neck vertebrae so that they lined up against the wishbone.

"I'm old but that doesn't mean I have all the answers."

“But their hearts,” I said. “What if Lyza does it?”

Mama G tapped my chest. “Let’s finish our bird, hm? Hand me the keel.”

We glued the ribcage together piece by piece until the thin, frail bones could, in theory, house a tiny, beating heart.

How to Explode an Exploding Man

The first thing I noticed about Ahmose when he walked in for his flight lesson was the ticking, which was odd because he wasn't wearing a watch. It seemed rude to ask about it, though, seeing as we'd just met. Florida Flight Academy was the only flight school with rubber planes in the area, the kind Ahmose needed to learn to fly (for work, he said). He was cute, you know? Maybe 5' 11", tan. Nose strong and straight. So I shuffled things around, ignored the ticking as best I could, and took him up in Beluga. He approached the twin-engine the way you expect a person to approach a horse from behind, real quiet and running a hand along her side. It was sort of creepy the way his nails left faint little lines in the rubber, but I got it, I understood. She was a new machine.

Learners usually ask about the warm rubber smell, the burning asphalt smell, but Ahmose didn't. Instead he asked about the seats.

These seats, he said, pressing his thighs into one. What are they made of?

I pretended to adjust the seat height so I could check the tag. All that was left was the frayed edge.

A special-order fabric, I said.

It is comfortable, he said and nodded.

What's your flight experience? I asked. I'd read the form; I just wanted to hear him talk. He had a lilting lisp that made me think of his tongue behind his lips.

Some, he said.

Make sure to hold steady, I told him. These planes handle a little wobbly getting off the ground because of the rubber coating on the wings.

I handed him a pre-flight inspection checklist.

Control Wheel Lock – Remove

Ignition Switch – Off

Avionics Master Switch – Off

Master Switch – On

Fuel Quantity Indicators – Check Quantity

Flaps Down

Master Switch – On

Fuel Valve – On

Have you seen this before? I asked.

Yes, he said.

We ran through the checklist anyway, turned the fuel valve on for both tanks, and kept the electrical off so that when the engines came on we wouldn't overload any of our radios.

Make sure your mixture is rich, I said. I directed his hand toward the small, red knob labeled "Mix Fuel."

Press it in with your thumb like this, I said.

How? he asked.

He took my hand in his. Show me, please, he said, so I did. I shaped his hand around the knob, shaped my hand around his hand, and pushed the plunger all the way in.

Ahmose's skin was cool. I hoped my sweaty palms would go unnoticed.

Now the Master Switch, I said.

He flipped the switch and turned the key and the engines jumped on.

Out the windshield, rope light palm trees stood stiff against the breeze, their plugs buried in the sandy dirt like roots. They'd light up in a few hours and mix with the blue runway lights. From high enough you can see thousands of green dots poking at the dark.

Ahmose got Beluga in the sky with minimal trouble. There was a moment where the left wing dipped and we felt it in the cockpit like a faulty hop on a trampoline, but he righted her quickly. He was a real natural, so I asked him if he was sure he hadn't flown one of our planes before and instead of answering he kissed me so I kissed him back because that's what you do when someone kisses you and they hardly speak your language. There we were, thousands of feet above the crisscrossing pavement making out, him with one hand on my hip and me with one eye on our levels. I kept the other eye closed, though. For intimacy purposes. And I thought, wow, here's this man who likes me, and I knew I had to keep him to myself because the other women at Florida Flight Academy would distract him with their perfect lips and hips and eyes. Especially Nancy.

When I asked him later, over spaghetti (he'd never had spaghetti!), why he kissed me, he said it was because the way the light tangled in my hair reminded him of his homeland. He wouldn't tell me where he was from.

People often ask me if I'm Puerto Rican (which I'm not) because my hair is thick and dark, and I'm tan and I've got a little extra around my waist. I'm not usually offended by this because Puerto Rican women are loud and beautiful and not all of them are pudgy. But when I tell people my homeland is South Florida, they nod like something they'd been trying to figure out about me has suddenly become clear, and I have to wonder if I'm missing something about myself, if maybe seeing myself from a different vantage point would make my whole being, my whole life trajectory, seem somewhat like a maze with a very clear path.

*

For my 12th birthday, my grandfather gave me an ant farm, a small, green, plastic one with a fake farm cut-out at the top and Plexiglas panes that got smudged all the time. I'd carefully lift the edge of my t-shirt and scrub away the fingerprints.

Not all girls have to play with dolls, my grandfather told me.

My mother's lips pursed at this. She was way traditional in her approach to raising me. It was my grandfather who told me I didn't have to wear dresses all the time (I always snagged the hems on branches, which made my mother click her tongue at me). It was my grandfather who, in the end, encouraged me to fly.

I spent hours watching my harvester ants dig tunnels through sand. Every couple of days I replaced the damp cotton ball that served as their water source. Once a week I gave them cracker crumbs, watched them carry the pieces all the way to the bottom of the ant farm.

No queen in this colony, Grandpa told me. It's illegal to import them.

But what about babies? I asked.

I'd been hoping to see pockets of little white eggs. I wanted to watch the colony grow.

No babies, honeybunch. These are all girls here. No guys.

Grandpa ruffled my hair.

From across the room the ants were hardly visible—tiny black dots wandering a series of interconnected alleys.

*

Despite our make-out session, I managed to end Ahmose's first lesson on a professional note. I shook his hand and walked him across the sun-baked tarmac to the

reception area—and by reception area I mean drywall, high school carpet, and a Goodwill love seat—to confirm his next lesson. A turkey vulture hovered overhead. Ahmose watched it circle while I heaved open the hangar door. Reception was behind a door in the far left corner of the metal building.

Today Nancy, FFA's appointments manager, wore her favorite low-cut shirt. There were rhinestones involved. Lots of them.

We're down for next Wednesday, right? I asked Nancy.

She tapped her pen against the World War I-era metal desk and narrowed her eyes, glancing quickly between Ahmose and me. I sucked on my lips, pulled out chapstick. I did not have kissing lips. I had chapped lips.

Yeah, she said. Same time next Wednesday.

Okay, Ahmose said. Same time next Wednesday.

He touched my wrist, nodded curtly, and disappeared out the door before I had a chance to say goodbye, and why would you just walk away like that, so quickly, from the woman you'd just been making out with, hm?

So, said Nancy.

She quirked an eyebrow at me and I bailed, quick-walked right out the door so I wouldn't have to answer her questions. Because I didn't have answers.

*

I like to keep things small. This is why I learned to fly. People make more sense as dots. I like to connect them and sometimes divide them up. For example, Small Red Dot meets Medium Purple Dot and Medium Purple Dot splits his/her croissant down the middle so as to share it with Small Red Dot who ends up with a cup of coffee in his/her lap and the

two laugh but don't see each other again until Small Green Dot sets them up. By this point they've forgotten that they've already met, and when they go for coffee this time they'll both instinctively position their cups in the middle of the table. As a child I watched planes slowly small themselves—that's what I called it, "smalling"—until they disappeared. I think that's when I first wondered about loneliness. My mother told me it didn't exist.

My first boyfriend, when I was seventeen, told me during our break-up that he thought I'd marry someone who wore a leather bracelet. He was always saying things like this, even while we were together, how I'd be happy someday with someone who wasn't him.

I don't like leather, I told him. I hadn't told him about my nightmares, dreams where men and women unzipped cows, stepped inside, breathed deeply, smiled, leaving me to call the next group of customers forward.

I ate meat. It was just leather that freaked me out. It smelled funny.

Oh honey, he said, and he brushed my cheek.

The next man, a man in college, said I'd fall for someone with a shoulder bag. He wore a Jansport. The one after him (who, coincidentally, did wear a shoulder bag) said it would be a man in Chucks.

Eventually I started keeping a list and sometimes drawing it out to see what my apparent perfect man would look like. Ahmose was none of these things. He was Egyptian, I learned from the news. He wore button-up shirts all the time (as if this would make him American) and a cheap watch. He wore sneakers, always Nikes. Sometimes brown loafers if we went to Olive Garden.

*

During our second trip up in Beluga, Ahmose ran his thumb along my eyebrow and smiled.

Remember to keep your hands on the controls, I said.

Not because I wanted him to, but because he had to.

We flew in silence for a while and I was afraid I'd offended him. Cars snaked along the highway below us, shiny bits of red and blue and yellow against the asphalt.

My mother, Ahmose said. Back home. She cooks and we sell the skewered lamb. Have you eaten lamb?

I shook my head. No.

Oh, he said.

Ahmose's ticking hadn't gone away. If anything it seemed louder.

What *is* that? I asked.

Ahmose just stared straight ahead into the sky, leaving me to wonder some more about pacemakers and pocketwatches and the way my ants march through sand tunnels like they have a faulty inner beat.

*

Back in reception, Nancy asked me if I thought Ahmose's ass was nice. She did this to clients all the time, asked about bad boob jobs and if a man was hiding abs under his polo, so I wasn't surprised by the question.

Mostly he sits on it when he's with me, but sure, I guess, I said.

Truth be told, I hadn't thought to check. Between the kissing and the teaching-how-to-fly, my eyes didn't get much lower than his chest, which, if I was to be honest, and I'll be honest, was quite nice. You could tell he worked out.

Well, said Nancy. He's got a nice ass.

I could practically smell her spray tan. She tucked a strand of bottle-brown hair behind her ear (four piercings).

Thanks, I said.

I'm not sure why I said it, and judging by Nancy's look she didn't know either.

I think I'm going to ask him out, she said. Are you into him at all?

It was nice of her to ask, I guess. She opened a Tupperware and popped a piece of watermelon in her mouth.

When I blush it's not attractive, and I felt the pigment crawling up my face. So here's how it went down:

I reddened like a cherry bomb and finally managed a nod. I'm mostly a keep-it-to-myself kind of woman. Nancy smirked and tilted her head a little to the right.

You've got good taste, she said. I'd say you've got about a week to make your move, hon.

Then the phone rang and she answered (Good evening. Florida Flight Academy. This is Nancy. What can I do you for?) and I hurried to the parking lot where I sat in my car and watched the sun set and the palm trees, one by one, begin to glow.

*

On weekends I sang karaoke with Nancy sometimes because all my real friends left Florida for jobs in Boston, San Diego, New York—anywhere but the swamps, they said,

anywhere without this damn humidity (Carol patted her hair down)—and then stayed gone. Specks of my former life flung far and wide.

Tonight Nancy wore red pumps and an otherwise fairly modest black dress (unless you count the fact that it put her fake-bake breasts a little too much on display). To the left of the bar a woman in platform shoes screeched out a rendition of “Bohemian Rhapsody” with her 50-something boyfriend/father/gay best friend. I ordered a peach schnapps and Sprite and wished I’d had the guts to invite Ahmose out to Panera or something that night.

Nancy put her clutch on the bar.

Been waiting long? she asked.

No, I said. I sucked at my drink through a tiny red straw. The skinny kind usually reserved for coffee.

Why are you wearing that? She squinted at my jean skirt as if she couldn’t see it.

Jack and Coke, she told the bartender.

What’s wrong with my skirt? I asked.

Seriously? Aside from the fact that it’s three inches too long and you’re wearing it with sneakers and a boyfriend tee from Target? Unless, she gasped. Wait. Is it an actual boyfriend tee? Is it that guy’s? The ass guy’s?

I felt the heat creeping into my cheeks.

Yes, I lied. My stomach fluttered and for a second I even believed myself.

Nancy squealed. Good for you! You don’t still have all those ants do you? They’ll freak him out and you’ll never get him into bed. And he looks like he’d be really good in bed.

She dabbed on a little more lipstick.

That weird ticking doesn't bother you does it? she asked. Because I'd be happy to ignore it. And what is it anyway? A watch?

Must be a watch, I said.

It was good to know I wasn't the only one who could hear it. I was starting to wonder.

And of course the ants are gone. What am I, twelve? I said.

This was, of course, a big, fat, just-for-Nancy lie. Once, I told her my car broke down to avoid going out and she came to pick me up. Just barged right in while I was crumbling bits of biscuit into the ant farms I keep in my living room. Then she barged right out. I found her huddled in the front seat of her car brushing her bare arms like my ants were crawling all over. I would never subject them to that.

The woman on stage shrilled out the last note of her song.

Excellent, said Nancy. No more ants, lots of booze. Time to sing.

She grabbed her drink, grabbed my hand, and took us both to the stage. I felt a little guilty about lying to Nancy, but it was also Nancy and now she'd stay away from Ahmose. I could take my time with him, and the thought of that made singing "Total Eclipse of the Heart" feel much less embarrassing than usual.

*

During our third flight, I realized that there was something different about Ahmose. He held himself more consciously than American men, a little less weight in the waist, a little more height in the shoulders. He seemed lighter in his movements and less compact, like he was freer to breathe. He had a purpose and seemed to be very aware of it. There was also the ticking, which was practically booming in my ears what with the stuff Nancy said at karaoke. Once we were safely in the air, I made up my mind. I asked him about it again. If

he was allowed to kiss me ten minutes after meeting me, I was allowed to ask him this sort of question two weeks after he kissed me.

It is nothing, he said. Only, how you say it, genetics.

Genetics? I asked.

Genetics, he said.

He tilted Beluga's nose slightly down so that a brown slice of coastline filled the bottom half of our windshield. Billions of tiny grains of sand blown around every day by waves and wind and sandaled feet.

It's really loud, I said. Maybe you should get it checked out.

Someday it will stop, Ahmose said. Like it stopped for my father and my father's father.

He veered left so that we were flying parallel to the beach.

It is not such a very big deal, he said.

Yeah it is, I said. It's a huge deal. You didn't fill out anything in the Health Risks section of the FFA form.

My cheeks get red when I'm mad, too. I hate it.

You're doing it wrong, I said.

I took over the controls for a minute and adjusted our course so that we weren't drifting into the ocean, then gave them back.

Below, scattered in the sand and in the waves, were Tourist Dots and Local Dots, and there, just beyond the sand bar were upwards of fifty Shark Dots. I imagined the Shark Dots eating the Tourist Dots and some Local Dots and becoming very full and possibly exploding,

and then I was thinking about Ahmose again and his ticking and how I hoped nothing bad would happen in Beluga.

You'll need to sign an insurance waiver, I told him. So that FFA isn't held liable.

I paused.

You know, I said. In case something happens.

Yes, he said. Of course.

And the way he said it seemed a little sad, so I was afraid I might have hurt his feelings.

Tell you what. I have a two-hour break after we're done here. Let me buy you a milkshake, I said, and my hands trembled because I'd never asked a man out before. You've had a milkshake before?

Ahmose nodded. All right, he said. A milkshake.

*

Ahmose was the kind of man who smoothed his slacks as he walked, but still managed to wear them easily. Somehow I imagined he'd be dainty, refined, about the way he sipped his shake.

Do they drive many cars in New York? Ahmose asked.

We were sitting in my old Ford Taurus, which I hate driving because I have to practically stand to see out the oblong back window.

Not really, I said. At least I don't think so. I think people mostly take cabs or the subway or something. You could pick a person at random here and ask and they'd know better because practically everyone here is from there.

Thank you, Ahmose said.

You're going to love Larry's, I said. It's the best ice cream in town.

The place channels the fifties, and once seated in our red vinyl booth sipping shakes (chocolate for him, strawberry for me) Ahmose began to talk. Doo-wop drowned out his ticking and I think he was happy about that because he talked a lot about the statue of liberty and the New York skyline and showed me his favorite keychain—Lady Liberty in perfect miniature detail. I promised to bring him a guidebook from the library.

*

Adult harvester ants can be winged males or females, or wingless female workers. The ants have two pairs of wings, one smaller than the other. (All stuff that came with the ant farm my grandpa gave me when I was 12.)

After a large rainfall, the winged males and females swarm up, away from the parent colony. They pair off. In mid-air each male couples with a female. They are two small pinpoints in a cloud of small pinpoints. The cloud is a black smudge against a damp sky.

*

I began to look forward to Wednesdays because Ahmose and I regularly went for shakes after his flight lesson. He'd talk about New York and I'd talk about planes. How I started flying in high school, before I could even drive a car. How my grandfather drove me because my mother wanted me to learn to knit and balance bills. How I ended up a flight instructor because the pilot pool for major airlines (Delta, American Airlines, you name it) was just too big.

Once, I told Ahmose, when I was still getting used to Beluga I bumped the Four Seasons Hotel in Miami. Just barely, but I thought the plane was falling apart, the wing bounced so bad.

Here Ahmose smiled and touched my hand. And you were okay? he asked. Not hurt?

A little whiplash, I said. But nothing serious, no.

This is good, he said.

I smiled. And I thought it was a little strange that Ahmose hadn't yet nudged a building. Not even once.

*

Several weeks into our lessons, Ahmose met me on the runway for a night flight. His skin glowed faintly green in the palm-light.

I think I'll have strawberry today, he said. After we fly.

Why don't we just buy ice cream and make shakes somewhere? I asked.

His hand was soft on mine as we walked to Beluga, and I wondered what sort of lotion he used and if it was available in this country.

Because, he said, in my country we do not bring women home before marriage.

I didn't know until the FBI showed up (which was after I found his note in my bathroom) that this wasn't true. I didn't invite him to my house because what if Nancy was right? What if he saw my ants and left?

Let's fly south tonight, I said.

Ahmose turned us toward Miami. Six minutes later an endless sequence of faraway lights outlined the city beneath us.

Ahmose explained that he moved around a lot for his job.

Medical supplies, he said. Boss says learn to fly, so I learn to fly.

The Miami Beach pier extended, orange and hazy, into the ink-water.

Take us back inland more, I said.

He fumbled the wheel the way a trained pilot does when demonstrating terrible mistakes to new students.

I told him this and he regarded me with straight lips and honest eyes.

I need you to teach me better, he said. To fly these kind of controls. This kind of plane.

I said yes, okay, I could teach him if he wanted to learn and I felt sort of sad then because I thought maybe he pretended because he liked spending time with me and who was I to turn that down, me who spends so much time above the ground?

Below us, a neon landscape. Between us, the constant ticking .

*

When we finally slept together it was quieter than I expected. He paid particular attention to the insides of my elbows. His lips left damp spots across my stomach. Afterward, we watched the palm tree grow dim behind my venetian blinds. The town was trying to save energy by turning them down after three a.m. Ahmose arched his back, popping vertebrae, then lay beside me breathing.

When I'm with you, he said. I can't hear myself.

Ahmose didn't mind the ant farms.

*

After leaving the swarm, female ants break off their own wings and bury themselves in plant matter or sand or soil. Somewhere in the ground. They lay eggs. They raise young. They become queens of their own colonies, which give rise to winged males who, like those before them, will also shed their wings and die.

*

By our next lesson I could hear it over the engines. Ahmose looked a little paler, I thought, and his hands seemed looser on the controls.

It was a hot day even by Florida's standards and it smelled as though Beluga was melting, heavy and toxic. I wondered sometimes if the fumes would make me sick one day.

Take her lower, I told Ahmose. Sweat slid toward his left ear. When I wiped it away he flinched.

What was that for? I asked.

Beluga sank lower and I felt the altitude in my stomach, a giddy feeling I never stopped loving. Tickle-belly, my mother used to call it. Sweat slicked behind my knees.

You okay? I asked. You're dropping altitude a little fast. Pull up a bit.

I'm fine, he said.

But the ticking seemed louder then, and when we landed, and our ears popped, it practically boomed.

I went in for my purse and when I came back out Ahmose was gone. He'd never given me a phone number, but he'd always been on time, always shown up.

The following Wednesday I sat outside under Beluga waiting for him until Nancy came outside and announced that my 4 o'clock was here. Ted's Bermuda shorts and floral shirt depressed me.

This was the end of August.

*

Early in September Ahmose came into FFA looking the same as always, except holding his shoulders a little differently, a little further back, like he was trying to stretch

them. He was always stretching after we'd, you know, been together, but this was different, contained.

I wasn't expecting him. It was after hours and Nancy and I were finishing the day's paperwork.

Speak with me, he said, and gestured toward the door.

I told Nancy I'd be back and followed him outside. Beluga hulked on the runway. I could tell by the way Ahmose stood still, clenching and unclenching his fingers, that he was operating under a restrained sort of panic.

I have done something, he said. Or I might be about to. I don't know.

I closed my ears against the ticking.

Night grew around us, and the palm trees still didn't come on.

What you said the first night, about the way spaghetti must be twirled just correctly? said Ahmose.

I stared at him. I'd been telling him that spaghetti must be twirled a certain way so as to balance the fork toward the mouth for perfect consumption.

Thank you, he said.

He hugged me then, only it was more like resting his arms around me. He seemed tired and I could feel his heart beat quick against my chest.

I pushed him away. You left, I said. You didn't call or anything.

I wished then for a ten-minute downpour, the kind of rain that reinvents a person and allows them to live up close.

I know, he said. I'm sorry. He paused. It's been getting worse.

He was right. His hands shook like low blood sugar and nerves.

And because I knew this was it, I let it go.

Let me show you something, I said, and led him toward Beluga.

From the sky everything is smaller. Perspective broadens. I wanted to show him this. I wanted to forget the ticking and remind myself how small I was, how this one moment would feel dimmer in a few months. All the palm trees were out. After the blue glow of the runway we were left with moving headlights and stationary stars. The engines buzzed and Ahmose's ticking grew smaller. That night, in bed, we slept.

*

Crumpled sheets tell stories. Mine said this:

Ahmose woke early. He stepped into the closet (slightly ajar) and wrote a note. He went to the bathroom, where he left the note. The note read, "Thank you." He thought for a moment, possibly regarded himself in the mirror, then left his statue of liberty keychain next to the note. After this, Ahmose watched me for a moment, then—and this might be wishful thinking—fixed the blanket on my side. He put on his shirt and left through the front door, knocking over five of my ant farms.

Harvester ants all over my couch, my walls, my carpet. A million tiny brown dots.

I woke to the phone. Nancy calling to tell me Beluga was missing. The news told me the rest. Every channel was the same: burning buildings, Ahmose's face, people falling from the skyline.

The statue of liberty sharp in my hand.

Leaf Ericson: American

Every morning I wake up at seven a.m., flex my biceps to make sure they're still viable, and check my face to make sure it looks rough enough. It was my rough face that got me my job, you know. Leaf Ericson. That's who I Become. And Leaf Ericson, despite being cartoonish in nature, has the rough face of an historical Viking. When I auditioned for the gig, I had a black eye from my first-ever bar fight. The casting people at Mindy World loved it. Said that as long as I had the black and blue, I had the job. So every five days or so I punch myself in the right eye. When my vision starts to go blurry, or that particular eye is too tender to continue pummeling, then I go for the left eye. At first all this self-injury made me nervous. I couldn't bring myself to do it, had to pick fights every so often to get the job done. (The most theatrical was outside of Riverfront Tattoo.) Now I can cold-clock myself just fine thank you, and I do so this morning—down six or seven Advil, close my eyes and swing. It hurts, but only for a minute until the ice is on it. After the Advil kicks in I can hardly feel the throbbing at all.

I need to look extra-rugged today because today is the day Sweet Caroline will talk to me. Today is the day she won't be walking with Prince Charming. I'm sure of it. Yesterday, in the Tunnels, she gave me this look, like *Come hither, please*. Her looks are always polite because that's just how Sweet Caroline is. I wonder sometimes how she is outside of being Sweet Caroline. What her real name is, for example. If she wears her tiara all the time, like I wear my gauntlets, to keep from Unbecoming.

Here's the thing. Mindy World is in Florida. Used to be this Big Name theme park that I can't say explicitly due to a secrecy contract I signed when I Became Leaf Ericson.

You figure it out. I can say this: Mindy Land is owned by Keifer Gates, bought for his daughter who went around and renamed a lot of us. Not me because I'm new. My movie, *Leaf Ericson: American*, came out a year ago, after the park was already undergoing renovations. Mindy liked it. Here is the premise of my movie: I, Leaf Ericson, sail from my native Iceland with only my beard of leaves to keep me warm. No one believes in me, especially my father. I set off to find a new land where people who are different, like have leafy beards, can live in peace. Also I set out to conquer nations to compensate for my beard of leaves. I won't give away the ending. But I was part of Mindy World's big reopening.

I practice smoldering looks in the rearview and work my way into Leaf's British accent, lilting my O's, dropping my R's. Even though no Viking ever spoke with a British accent. In make-up, Clarice rubs extra eye shadow into my black eye to help its bruising along.

"Thank you," I tell her through my teeth.

She moves on to the foundation. "You hear about today, sweet pea?"

Clarice is a bombshell. Really, she is. But it's the medicinal way she uses her hands that keeps me from doing anything about it. I heard Teddy Two-Toes did once, but he's in a bear suit, so he doesn't see her for make-up.

"What's today?" I ask. Other than the day that Sweet Caroline will finally be unaccompanied by Prince Charming (Mindy kept that name the same) in the Tunnels.

On goes the long, red wig with attached metallic helmet.

"Think you can hold your sweat back till you hit the streets this time? I don't have time to redo your make-up this morning."

Wicked Witch and a couple of the Short Guys hover in the doorway. Even without her green make-up, the Witch scowls something frightening. Clarice attaches my leafy beard. It's like Fall on my face.

"What's today?" I ask again.

"Hm? Oh." She dabs at the corners of my mouth, removing extra spirit glue. "It's Character Dedication Day. Visitor Compliments are tallied up."

"But it hasn't been six months. It's only been five-and-a-half."

Five-and-a-half months since I lost to Prince Charming. I should still have two more weeks to get my votes up.

"Summer season's winding down, so they moved the tally up." Clarice pokes at my black eye again and it stings. "Winner gets a dinner for two at Steak Jam."

Immediately my thoughts turn to Sweet Caroline sitting beneath hanging, space-age guitars, chewing a bit of salad then shyly sawing off a piece of steak—medium-rare—and pressing it between her lips. She tucks a cloth napkin into the front of her gown and holds her silverware carefully so she doesn't stain her gloves.

"Earth to Ericson." Clarice snaps her fingers in my face, her red nails clicking together. I shake myself and my beard rustles.

"You're done," she says. I look in the mirror and there I am. I've Become Leaf Ericson: rugged, handsome, danger softened by nature. I look nothing like me, but I feel more me than ever. This is the me that Sweet Caroline knows. This is the me I want her to know. The me that has abs and a deep laugh and doesn't watch Dateline while eating spray cheese with Cheez-Its. Clarice shoves me through the bright lights of make-up into the dimmer costuming quarters.

Here, two sets of busy hands undress me. I can hardly tell who they are today (Joan? Kyle? Rona?) for the way they're buzzing around, talking into their headsets.

"Yeah, we've got him here," says Number One.

Number Two unzips my Pizza Hut hoodie and pulls it off.

"How many times have we told you not to wear these clingy undershirts, Ericson? They make you sweaty." This must be Rona. I shrug.

"Close your eyes." I do, and her hands roll my shirt up efficiently. Her fingers are cold against my bare skin. There is the creaking stretch of fabric as the neck is pulled wide and lifted over my head. My undershirt clips the top of my helmet, which then slides over my eyes.

"Damn," Rona mutters. "I don't know why they don't just let us get you dressed *before* putting on the make-up." She rights my helmet and I see her face clearly: brown eyes, short hair, extra-long eyelashes. Her lips are turned down in a frown and she smudges at my eye.

"Ouch," I say.

She ignores me. "Clarice'll kill me if I send you back in there. Plus they need you topside. The ladies are clamoring. Here."

Rona tosses my clothes at me: leggings, armor, cape. Shield. Production-value sheet metal axe. I dress and Rona regards me coolly.

"You look good, Ericson," she says. "Very pillage-my-brains-out-but-nicely."

So I practice my smolder on her. Squinting the eyes just...so.

She laughs. But just a little. "You better hope that works better on the Visitors or your Compliments will be down. Now go."

I threaten her with my axe and hit the Tunnels.

The Tunnels snake beneath all of Mindy World so that we can get from one Designated Area to another without weaving through visitors. What takes 30 minutes topside takes 10 down here. It's cold. My footsteps echo on the concrete. I am in Iceland, alone and lacking socially proper facial hair. I want blood on my hands and women at my hips. My father is wrong. This beard has not softened me. There is an entire world to plunder.

A giggle. A Pixie twitters past me all green and glitter. Two more, yellow and blue, follow. I resist the urge to capture them, and instead focus on the previous night's battle for provisions during which a Native woman hit me in the eye with a rock. She died screaming.

"Good day, kind sir." Sweet Caroline stands before me, a little more rouged than usual I think. Even in the Tunnels we must play our parts, so I give her my best smolder. I drop my voice a register.

"Where's your princely escort?" I ask.

"He'll arrive shortly I suspect," she says. She lays a hand on my chest plate and I wish I could feel her fingers against my skin, tangled in my chest hair.

Above us: the occasional metallic clang of someone somewhere in the park dropping trash into the 55-mile-per-hour chute that runs along the Tunnels. Sweet Caroline folds her hands in front of her, one over the other against the blue fabric of her ball gown. I grip my axe and search for a line from *Leaf Ericson: American* fitting for the situation at hand. There isn't one that doesn't end in involuntary dragging, at least not until Ericson gets to America—which he finds is already populated—and becomes softened by fast food and pop culture. (Don't worry. This still isn't the ending.) So I improvise.

"Shall I escort you to your kingdom?" I ask. By the way Sweet Caroline lifts a perfect eyebrow, I know I'm dangerously close to Unbecoming. There are cameras everywhere—snuggled in ceiling corners, hidden in the light fixtures.

Sweet Caroline steps back. She lifts a gloved hand to her mouth and laughs. "Why Leaf Ericson, your domain is clear across the World from mine. It hardly seems practical."

My face flushes beneath my leaves and Prince Charming picks this precise moment to arrive. His boots are particularly shiny today.

"Ah, there you are," she teases him. He smiles and lifts her fingers to his lips. He puts my smolder to shame.

"I was just speaking with Leaf Ericson." Sweet Caroline gestures toward me.

"How lovely," he says. We all know he doesn't mean it. It's common knowledge that Prince Charming gets jealous. He levels his eyes at me. I tighten my fingers around my axe, knowing that Leaf Ericson would whack him and steal Sweet Caroline away. I don't do this because I know I'll get fired, and if I get fired I'll never see her again.

The Briny Brunch (Keifer named that one) must have just ended because it sounds like someone drops a semi on top of us. Even the concrete walls shake. The garbage shoots by with a *whoomp!*

"My darling," says Prince Charming. "Shall we proceed?"

Sweet Caroline nods and her blonde ringlets bounce. It's a wig of course, and I wonder what color her hair is underneath. I imagine she's a brunette. In the right light I think her hair would shine red. I hear the word "barbarian" as they walk past and I focus on Becoming Leaf Ericson enough to win the Steak Jam dinner.

It's bright outside. Bright and hot the way only Florida can be. I'm breathing through a wet blanket, already beginning to sweat. Even super deodorant won't help me now. By all logic the stench should repel women. Instead it seems to attract them. Park management almost pulled me from the floor because women kept slipping phone numbers in my boots. The worst was a middle-aged woman who groped me, put her hand right between my legs. But I shouldn't be saying this. It's bad publicity.

Today Leaf Ericson's America, my Designated Area, is packed. I swing my axe from side to side and yell in Icelandic: "Godan daginn! Godan kvöldid!" These are greetings, but no one knows this because I keep my voice low and angry. Visitors part like the Norwegian Sea for my ship and I make my way toward the stage throne. My throne is large and pewter. On any given day children sit on my knees for photos and mistakenly ask me for gifts, which makes the parents laugh. Then the women sit on my knees and wish for dirtier things and sometimes steal leaves from my beard. Then my Guard, a skinny teenaged Viking, has to pull them off and throw them in the Icelandic Cool Down Tank. I'm sometimes distracted by their wet clothing, but then I think of Sweet Caroline and when that becomes problematic I let Leaf come forward a little more and think of bloodshed and disapproving fathers.

Mindy's Castle cuts through the clouds to my left. I'd have to chop thousands of heads to get there. As it is, I have to make my way to the front of a very long line. Children gasp as I pass. Women reach for me. I hold my head higher and keep my hand on my axe until I reach my throne. Then I hold it to the throat of the man sitting in it.

"Woah there, hey there," he says, holding his hands up. The crowd laughs.

"Mind your place," I say.

"What? What, don't you recognize me, man?" he asks. He reaches around me for his Coke. My throne has cup holders now.

I look at him closely and I do recognize him. I do. He's me. Or rather, he's Leaf Ericson. But he's American Ericson from the second half of the movie. He's got short red hair and no beard, and he's wearing a polo and khakis and Sperry's. This isn't supposed to happen. Not yet. And even then, I'm supposed to play American me. I mean Leaf.

"Bro," says American Ericson. "Put down the axe. Grab a burger or something. Live Life American©." And here he swings his legs over the arm of my throne and appeals to the crowd. "I mean am I right?"

They cheer. Up until this point I hadn't noticed the new Golden Arches behind my throne. Leaf Ericson would probably kill this guy. I, on the other hand, am strictly prohibited from inflicting violence upon anyone inside of Mindy World. Plus the axe is fake and dull. So I compromise by pressing my blade harder against his throat.

"Alright, alright," he says. "You want to settle this? We'll settle this the American way."

Then he stands and cold-clocks me.

There's a roar in my ears from the heat and the punch, and the crowd, all their hands grabbing at me, pulling me, pushing me back and back toward the very edge of my Designated Area. And I know, I just know, he's going to get all the Visitor Compliments.

Because I can't leave Leaf Ericson's America until six p.m., I spend the rest of my shift stalking the perimeter while women and children swarm American Ericson. I watch them deposit Compliments into the Compliments Box as they leave. Several small bunches

of leaves are missing from my beard. My face throbs and my jaw's making a clicky sound, which hopefully doesn't mean it's broken. I'll probably catch hell for the leaves when they show up on eBay. Only three people speak to me. The first is a small girl with a bat painted across her face. The second is her father.

"You're not so scary," the girl says, staring up at me. "My daddy didn't want to take me here cause he said you'd be scary."

The father's shorts are too short and he's wearing socks with his sandals. He motions for a picture, so I wrap my axe arm around the girl and do my best Viking grimace. While I sign the girl's autograph book the father sizes me up.

"Don't know what my wife sees in you, man. She talks about you *all* the time. Well, maybe not you, but that Jack guy who plays you in the movies."

But before I can respond—before I can tell him that of course his wife is into Leaf Ericson, that he should look in the mirror and compare his squashed face to mine—his daughter has him by the hand and is dragging him back toward the fraud in my throne.

I don't want to talk about the other person who spoke to me. Let's just say I got a number I'll never call.

During the Lull Period when most of the visitors are eating or heading home, we send the Understudies out and gather in the casting room. We sit in folding chairs while one of the casting directors, whose name we aren't allowed to know, brings up the Visitor Compliments. I sink low in my chair next to Teddy Two-Toes. His feet each consist of one toe. He hugs me by way of greeting because Teddy Two-Toes is a walking hug. A big,

yellow walking bear hug. I shove him off because that's what Leaf Ericson would do. I put a little extra into the shove because that's what I would do, too.

Prince Charming has his arm around Sweet Caroline three rows to my right and four chairs up. His blonde hair matches hers perfectly. They were made to be worn together.

Then American Ericson walks in, handing out packets of M&Ms as he works his way up the aisle to an empty seat. I once left a few M&Ms in a glass of water for three days. They never dissolved.

"Helloooo people! Anyone else see Taylor Swift today? She was bangin'! Bangin'!"

Everyone who's allowed to laugh does, and for once I'm grateful that Leaf Ericson only occasionally smiles. The casting director loves it. He would. He casted him probably. He casted me and gave me no warning about American Ericson's appearance today. I decide: I'll catch the casting director on his way out and talk to him, ask him about this mix-up.

Teddy Two-Toes nudges me like, *Get a load of this guy*, and Prince Charming stiffens when American Ericson slaps him on the shoulder. The Pixies giggle in the back row and Wicked Witch mutters to herself, tapping her black-booted foot. The Short Guys just sit there looking sour.

"Alright, alright," says the casting director, grinning. "Let's get this show on the road."

He puts on his glasses and pulls out a slip of paper—all the Visitor Compliments tallied for the last six months.

“You know how this goes. You all have Compliments Boxes at the edge of your Designated Areas. Visitors rate you—vote you up or down our Character Dedication list. Every six months we tally up.”

The yellow Pixie yawns. We’ve all heard this before. Only American Ericson nods along with the casting director’s words.

"So. Dinner for two at Steak Jam would normally go to Teddy Two-Toes."

Teddy Two-Toes jumps up and does his Happy Spin™.

"However," the casting director continues. "However. Given that American Ericson got 600 compliments in his Designated Area's Compliments Box today alone, and some in other Designated Areas, too, at that rate he would well surpass Teddy, so what do you say we welcome him to the family and give it to him? What do you think?"

Teddy swings his head in silent sadness while everyone claps because you don't argue with your boss. American Ericson saunters to the front of the room and accepts his certificate with much bowing.

"Who'll you take with you?" asks one of the Short Guys. He looks grouchy, but he always looks grouchy.

Teddy sits beside me, expectant.

"Well," says American Ericson. He draws out the “L” and sort of shuffles back and forth on the soles of his feet. He holds a hand out to Sweet Caroline and she places hers in it. He kisses her fingers.

"May I have the divine honor of your presence at dinner?" he asks.

"The honor is all mine," she says, and right then and there American Ericson pulls her up and kisses her full on the mouth.

The casting director looks like he can't decide if American Ericson is sticking to his character or if he should be fired on the spot for touching another person inappropriately within the park. Prince Charming's shoulders stiffen and I'm feeling my bruises a little more directly. I stay my axe hand and will her to stop kissing him because it should be me. I should have won the dinner even over Teddy Two-Toes and I am Leaf Ericson who should be kissing her, not this joker. Teddy is shaking with rage and I wonder how big he is underneath that suit.

The casting director slips out before I can corner him. Prince Charming pulls me aside in the Tunnels. I whack him once with my axe handle and he lets go.

"My good sir," he says, stiffly. "I offer you a proposition."

I face him squarely.

"Go on," I say, searching the Tunnels for movement.

"No doubt you're searching for Sweet Caroline," he says. He begins to circle me and I heft my axe a little higher. This is possibly the last thing I need today.

"You mentioned a proposition," I say.

"I did."

Trash clangs through the chutes above us.

"Go on," I say.

Prince Charming's eyes drift upward. "I wonder," he says. "If a body might be so easily disposed of."

My first thought is of Sweet Caroline and I almost Unbecome.

"If you touch—"

"Not her, you dolt. *Him*."

"Him?"

Prince Charming smiles. "American Ericson."

I turn the axe in my hands.

"Consider the matter," says Prince Charming. "You care for Sweet Caroline. Don't look so surprised. You care for her, as I do. But with him around both our chances are squarely reduced."

He's right, of course. I hate American Ericson.

"If we get rid of him," I say, "Then..."

"He does not defile Sweet Caroline," he says.

"Yes. And I get my throne back."

Prince Charming unsheathes his sword and holds it toward me.

"Do we have an accord?"

I nod and touch my axe to his blade. "We have an accord."

Charming and I head in different directions to avoid suspicion. To the cameras it must look like we paused for a quick chat, nothing more. I return my costume to Rona and shower in the locker room. Only after I've toweled off and studied myself in the mirror, my own face, clean and clean-shaven, do I realize exactly what I've agreed to. One of the Short Guys walks by, a towel wrapped around his waist, no stocking cap over his bald head. I drop my eyes and he hurries around the corner to his own locker. I decide Prince Charming couldn't have been serious. Although a small part of me—the Leaf Ericson part of me—wishes he was.

The next morning Prince Charming finds me in the Tunnels.

“Ericson,” he says.

“Charming,” I say.

He taps the hilt of his sword. “Sooner rather than later would be most prudent.”

I force myself not to Unbecome, Of course Prince Charming would want to keep American Ericson away from Sweet Caroline. Of course he would seek to eliminate his opponent. That’s the character. I am mildly offended that he doesn’t find me enough of a threat to murder, and I allow Leaf Ericson to come forward a little more. I think about plump bodiced breasts, about setting fire to whole barns—burning them from the ground up. The blood-pounding exhilaration of lust and destruction.

“Agreed,” I say.

“Excellent.”

We part ways to avoid too much time together under the cameras.

American Ericson's impending demise makes working the periphery of my Designated Area much more bearable. It doesn't bother me so much anymore when parents tell their children to stand with me for a photo because they don't want to wait in line for the *other guy*, that I'm *just as good*.

When Sweet Caroline shows up at my Designated Area I can hardly believe it. She's breaking rules to be here, and her shiny pale blue dress stands out against the grays and purples of Leaf Ericson's America, so of course *he* sees her. He slings his legs around and stands at the front of the stage.

"My lady," I say. "Where's your fair prince?"

Sweet Caroline is flushed because American Ericson is singing now. Something Bon Jovi, I think.

"He has retired to his chambers for the moment," she says.

I take this to mean he's on lunch.

"Who oversees your domain?" I ask.

American Ericson makes his way through the crowd toward us, sipping a Coke in between lines of song. Sweet Caroline grips my arm. This is the first time she's touched me where I can feel it. My head goes a little fuzzy.

"My love," she says. "He comes this way. We feasted last night on the most delicious roast. He was a perfect gentleman."

At this moment, more than ever, I want her to drop the act and show me who she really is. She can't actually be into this guy. But then, she's not supposed to leave her Designated Area, especially since she's the most popular princess in the Kingdom. Yet here she is, swooning over my lesser self.

He's standing an inch from us, his fingertips sweeping along her jaw line, and then he's kissing her. Again. I want to remove his lips from his greasy face. I imagine sinking my axe into his groin. Cameras flash around us. This will end up on the internet and Those Above Us will see Sweet Caroline out of her Designated Area and she'll get fired and I'll never see her again.

In a moment of panic, I pull her to me and hold my axe to her throat. If it's a show they want, it's a show they'll get. She has to be back in her Area. Away from him.

"Barbarian," Sweet Caroline gasps.

I'm not sure what to do next. Small children begin to cry. My Visitor Compliments will reach an all-time low. I know this.

American Ericson looks baffled as I back toward the threshold of our Designated Area, pulling Sweet Caroline along with me.

"Good kind sir!" she cries. "Will you not save me?"

But I know as well as he does that American Ericson is soft and weak unless he catches his opponent unawares. Unless he sucker punches them like he sucker punched me. And because he does nothing, I know his Visitor Compliments will nosedive, too. Nobody likes a failed hero.

I pull Sweet Caroline into a crowd of tourists all wearing warm-up suits and visors with Mindy's signature stitched across the front. They take pictures as they scatter. Sweet Caroline puts on her best smile and waves as we go. I send smoldering glances and Viking grimaces in every direction. A man wearing Mindy World's blue-shirted uniform bends behind his ice cream cart, no doubt for a walkie talkie. I move faster.

"Barbarian," Sweet Caroline repeats. By her eyes I can tell that she's trying very hard not to Unbecome. There's something sharp there, harsh, and it only makes me want her more.

"Release me," she says, trying to pull her arm away.

"Never," I say, tightening my grip. I hadn't intended to kidnap her exactly. I only wanted to get her away from American Ericson. She's blinded by his whitened teeth and fancy watch, and the way he sings and hands out junk food. I bet the Ring Pop she's wearing came from him. He probably slipped it on her finger over steak and merlot the other night.

The crowds of people make the warm weather feel worse and I find myself searching for a Tunnel entrance. The groping hands don't help. They tug at Sweet Caroline's dress and

more than once she almost slips away. A uniformed security guard tries to slip through the crowd to my left, but a fat man in a too-small shirt gets in the way. I shove through the Visitors and into the cool dark underground. Air conditioning makes the sweat all over my body go cold. Sweet Caroline shoves against me, but not so hard as to Unbecome.

“Release me,” she says. Wisps of blonde hair come loose from her wig.

I pull her through the Tunnels, trying my best to avoid the cameras hidden along the ceiling. Probably they’ll think we’re just staying in character. We reach a pale purple door, go through it, and come out in Sweet Caroline’s Designated Area. I look around for security guards and see no bright purple uniforms wading through the tourists toward me.

I look around again.

Until this moment, I've never seen Sweet Caroline's Designated Area. I've known where it is on the map, but in reality the place towers with sweets the color of after-dinner mints. It's sickening. Giant ice cream cones and gummy bears all baby shades of pink and blue and yellow. A regular large-scale Candy Land. Enough to give you a stomach ache just for looking. I instantly hate it, but I know that with Sweet Caroline by my side I'd man up and deal with it.

Dozens of little girls in princess costumes stop us to ask Sweet Caroline for her autograph, to ask for her picture, to ask for hugs, all of which she does with poise. She deserved the steak dinner, I decide as we walk toward the door of her castle (not to rival Mindy's castle in size, of course). She pauses before we enter and turns to the crowd.

"A lady always powders her nose before receiving company," she says. Then she giggles and turns on her heel, leaving me momentarily alone outside.

When I enter, she's standing in a dimly lit corner of the dressing room—the only actual room inside the castle.

"How dare you," she says. Her eyes are mean and her fists balled. Even now she refuses to Unbecome.

I want to tell her I'm sorry, that I didn't mean to, but then she's grabbing my beard and pulling my face toward hers. For a moment I think she's going to kiss me and my whole body buzzes.

"Sweet Caroline" comes on the speakers and I realize where she got her name. Mindy must love this song. The crowd outside *Ba ba ba's*.

"I hope you realize you'll suffer for this," she says.

Any self-respecting Viking would ignore the painful pull of his beard and kiss her, but not Leaf Ericson. He sometimes has trouble with this sort of thing, which is part of the reason why his father finds him so laughable.

I do something despicable. I take her wig. It's not pinned down very well which is a relief because I wouldn't have wanted to hurt her.

She gasps. Even with her auburn hair pinned up she looks beautiful, like a dancer. I'm giddy for a moment because I was right—she's a brunette.

"This is conduct unbecoming," she snarls. She leaps for her wig and when I won't give it back she searches frantically for something to cover her hair with. There's nothing. The camera stares down from the light fixture.

A knock on the door.

"Sweet Caroline. It is I, your loyal guard. Is everything alright, my lady?" The security guard sounds incredibly bored.

I hold up Sweet Caroline's wig. "He'll see you without it," I say.

She balls and un-balls her fists, takes a deep breath, smooths the front of her dress. Through the fakest smile I've ever seen she says, "Everything is lovely, kind guard. Thank you."

I wait a minute. When security doesn't knock again, I figure he's gone to lunch.

"Sit tight," I tell Sweet Caroline because a Viking doesn't apologize for anything. Then I block the Tunnel door from the inside with a couple of concrete trashcans. She can't get out this way, and without a wig she can't go out the front. American Ericson won't get to her.

I find Prince Charming in the break room, eating a tin of tuna with a tiny wooden spoon. The kind of spoon you get from an ice cream truck. He looks about as tired of being dainty as I am of being barbaric. That's pretty tired. Trash whizzes around above us.

"Good afternoon," he says.

I sit. "You left your domain," I say. "Sweet Caroline came to mine."

Prince Charming stops eating. "Did she."

I nod. "To see American Ericson." I place Sweet Caroline's wig on the table.

"What did you do to her?" Prince Charming reaches for the hilt of his sword.

"Nothing," I tell him. "She's in her chambers where no one can get to her."

Prince Charming dabs at his lips with a napkin. "Good," he says. "Very good. And where is Ericson?"

I look at the clock. "He has lunch in twenty minutes."

We spend those twenty minutes sharpening our weapons on the concrete doorway under my Designated Area. A repairman accidentally broke the camera over here while fixing the trash chute a couple weeks ago. Hasn't been fixed yet and people don't come down here as often as you might think. They mostly hang around beneath Hickey and Mindy Mouse's Designated Area, hoping to see the owner's daughter and score brownie points. Keifer Gates has been known to give out free family admission tickets to whoever makes his daughter laugh.

Our blades sharpen up pretty nicely given that they aren't actual weapons, and when American Ericson comes through the door singing something about a bad romance, we grab him. Well, I grab him and Prince Charming presses the pointy end of his sword to the soft part of Ericson's throat. He changes his tune immediately.

"Woah there, hey there," he says. "Fellas. Dude-sters. What, if I may ask, is the meaning of all this pomp and circumstance?"

"You ignorant blight," says Prince Charming. "You know very well what this is about."

"Oh, you mean the girl? She with you? I had no idea, man, I swear."

I can feel him trying to raise his hands, but he can't, seeing as I have them pinned behind his back. Prince Charming presses the tip of the blade a little harder and American Ericson coughs. It's all very theatrical.

"Yes, she's with me," says Prince Charming.

I loosen my grip just enough so that American Ericson can extend his leg and give Prince Charming a good kick in the knee.

Charming winces. "Hold him tighter, will you?"

I shrug and tighten my grip. I Become Leaf Ericson a little more (charred lamb, headless bodies, smoldering thatch roofs).

"We're going to chop you into little pieces," I tell him. Then I bend down and whisper in his ear. "And I'm going to enjoy every bit of it."

"Ho there. Ha ha ha. You Joes really get into this, don't you? Very funny."

He is Unbecoming. Prince Charming notices this, too.

"We know not of what you speak, Ericson," says Prince Charming.

Something heavy hits the trash chute and we all look up. American Ericson stomps on my foot, sending a sharp pain up my shin. I wrench his arms behind him tighter.

"Alright, alright, this must be some sort of test, hey? So I'll go with it." American Ericson clears his throat. "Here's the thing," he says. "My dad? He's a Viking. Which makes me a Viking in designer clothing. So you boys better watch yourselves."

I Become a little more. "You know nothing of Vikings." I can hear the blood pounding in his neck, can see the sweat at his hairline.

"Man, you gotta do what I did and join the 21st century. Violence is not the answer. It's not going to make Daddy any prouder of you. Plus, these 21st century ladies? Bam," says American Ericson, thrusting his hips forward.

"Hold your tongue," says Prince Charming. There's a little blood of the tip of his blade now and real terror starts to bubble up in American Ericson.

"You guys, please. Come on. What is this, hazing? Ha ha. Very funny."

Prince Charming insists on a fair fight, a gentlemen's duel, so I let Ericson go. He has no weapon so it's not really all that fair when we descend upon him. Prince Charming sticks him in the leg and he's bleeding all over the concrete. I'm efficient the way my father

taught me to be. I place a hand over his mouth before he can scream. He tries to crawl away, dragging his leg behind him, but I hold him down and pull back his head. His red hair clumps between my fingers. Prince Charming finishes American Ericson off neatly—one swift slash across the throat. American Ericson lies there sputtering for a minute and then goes still. He'll never touch Sweet Caroline again, never kiss her, never know her beyond this place. And with him gone, I regain my throne.

Prince Charming wipes his blade along Ericson's polo and the messy part falls to me because I have the axe. I remind myself of burning villages and butchered animals. Provisions, provisions. The Tunnel door is locked and the Prince keeps a lookout while I hack and hew. Blood hits the walls even though I try to be careful. My arms get tired. I think only of how proud my father would be, of how Sweet Caroline would now be mine for the taking. I refuse to think of anything else. A few of the Short Guys aren't far from my end of the Tunnel. They whistle their favorite mining tune, some bubblegum pop song Mindy picked out for them.

"Hurry up," Prince Charming whispers.

Their footsteps draw closer and he walks out to head them off.

"You'll not want to go that way," he says. His voice echoes off the concrete walls.

"Why?" asks one of the Short Guys.

But this is all I hear because I'm up to my elbows in bone shards and blood and I'm trying not to throw up in my beard. I'm trying to squelch the panic. Vikings don't panic.

When all is said and done, American Ericson fits nicely into a Mindy World standard waterproof trash bag, which we then haul into the daylight.

The bag is heavy between us, and we stick to the outskirts of Leaf Ericson's America, following the Tunnel line through mock villages and plastic forests and aboveground fools-gold mines. Prince Charming looks neat and tidy, while my chest plate and hands are red with gore. Hopefully the Visitors will chock it up to enhanced stage show make-up. Probably they will.

We are stopped by a security guard only once—a teenager who's easy to bribe with promises of a tour of the Tunnels. He raises an eyebrow at the bag.

"What's that?" he asks.

"We must take an active role in keeping our domains clean," Prince Charming answers.

"Whatever, dude," says the security teen. "Tunnels at noon tomorrow."

He walks away, lighting a cigarette as he goes.

We find a trash chute behind the Pixie Town Fairy Food stand. In goes American Ericson. The chute sucks him down and we hurry back into the Tunnels to make sure that it goes all the way. The Tunnels are all spotty darkness after being in the sun, so we follow the *thunking* sound above us until we regain our sight. The park disposes of hundreds of pounds of garbage daily, but I have no idea where it all ends up. My guess is a trash compacter. There is one long *whoosh* around Wicked Witch's lair and then nothing. Prince Charming studies the ceiling with flat blue eyes. I tilt an ear toward the chutes, but all I hear is air conditioning. My shoulders are sore. Sweet Caroline's wig comes to mind, just lying there on the break room card table.

"The Princess," I say.

Prince Charming nods and sets off briskly toward his Designated Area. I stop in the break room to grab the wig then follow suit.

Sweet Caroline is not in her dressing room. Instead, there is Teddy Two-Toes, big and yellow and standing stock-still. Prince Charming puts on his most winning smile.

"Why my dear Teddy Two-Toes. You have not, by chance, seen my lovely Princess have you?"

Teddy Two-Toes does sort of an awkward shrug. It doesn't look right. Then he points at my blood-spattered chest and makes a haphazard gesture of concern. His weight looks off.

"A scuffle," I say.

Something angular protrudes from Teddy's side. I point this out to Prince Charming, who pokes it with the tip of his sword.

A muffled "ow."

I wrench Teddy's head off because I know it's Sweet Caroline inside, and why does she press her hand against my chest plate and then choose everyone over me?

Sweet Caroline pokes her head out. Her hair is messy and her lipstick is smudged. She tips Teddy over so she can climb out. I look and look but it's so dark in there that I can't see him. Teddy Two-Toes stands back up and puts his head back on. He shrugs then hugs Prince Charming, who accepts it because he must.

Sweet Caroline's dress is wrinkled and her gloves are off. She snatches the wig from my hands and places it on her head.

"Give me that," she says. "This is a shit job. It sucks. I have to play some cutesy gutless bimbo while Ken Doll over here squeezes my ass every chance he gets. Put that thing away."

She shoves his sword down. "And you?" She stalks toward me. "You're some Viking, huh? Too chickenshit to make a move. Always concerned with rules and Becoming." She rolls her eyes and throws her hands up in mock fear. She must have forgotten about the camera installed in the light fixture.

Teddy Two-Toes sits back and lights a cigarette. He doesn't even burn his fur.

"At least *American* Ericson knows how to ask a girl to dinner. He's not so hung up on regulations. And look, he didn't even get fired."

She doesn't realize that his character gives (gave) him more leeway. He basically got to be a person, a regular person. How can you be a regular person with a leaf beard? How?

Teddy Two-Toes looks at her like, *What about me, huh?*

She rounds on him. "You can't even sneak me out of here in that giant-ass bear suit of yours. What the hell."

"Sweet Caroline," I begin.

"Don't," she says. "Don't ever call me that. That is *not* my name, okay?"

She's Unbecoming, and quickly.

"My dear," says Prince Charming. "Perhaps you'd better lie down. You're simply not yourself."

Her face gets red and she goes to smack him. Teddy Two-Toes hugs her to keep her from doing it and I jump at Teddy Two-Toes because Sweet Caroline's yelling at him to let her go and suddenly I'm hacking at his arm to make him do what she says. Yellow fur sticks

to the blood on my chest plate and Teddy Two-Toes is bleeding all over the place, too. Some of it gets on Sweet Caroline and she screams. Teddy Two-Toes gestures wildly with his remaining arm and accidentally hits Sweet Caroline. I launch myself at him and keep hacking. Sweet Caroline's sobbing in the corner while Prince Charming strokes her hair and doesn't do a thing to stop me, just keeps his eyes on the light fixture. I chop and chop, but there's nothing more inside Teddy Two-Toes. How can there be nothing else, nothing but blackness and rough netted fabric and emptiness?

There's nothing left of Teddy Two-Toes but his nose when I smell the smoke. Tufts of yellow settle around me and I'm breathing hard. There's a small fire in the corner around Teddy's fallen cigarette and it's getting bigger. I try to stamp it out, but it won't go, and I realize I'm alone and the entrance to the Tunnels is locked. I slump at the dressing table and watch my leaves wilt one by one. I can hardly feel my black eye anymore. It's almost time for a new one. The mirror billows with smoke like Mindy Magic, secrets I'm never supposed to tell. I wonder what will become of Sweet Caroline. She'll probably get fired for Unbecoming. Those cameras have a way of making people disappear. Like one day I came in and there was no more Dragon. I stare up at the light fixture, at the red blinking lights.

Well hell, I think. Let the whole damn place burn.

A proper Viking death. A pyre. The lights blow one by one and the room takes on an orange glow. I imagine Visitors clutching their children, watching the smoke spiral up against the sky, matching the clouds puff for puff. They take pictures on their cell phones and tell their children to move a little so they're in the shot, too. Heat waves shimmer and I breathe like I'm drowning. The air is thick with smoke and the smell of things burning that should never be burnt. My chest plate is hot. Everything is hot and everything is smoke-

black, but I remember that in Iceland there's sun at midnight. But in Iceland, there's lots of darkness, too. Slowly, slowly the edges of my leaves begin to blacken and curl.